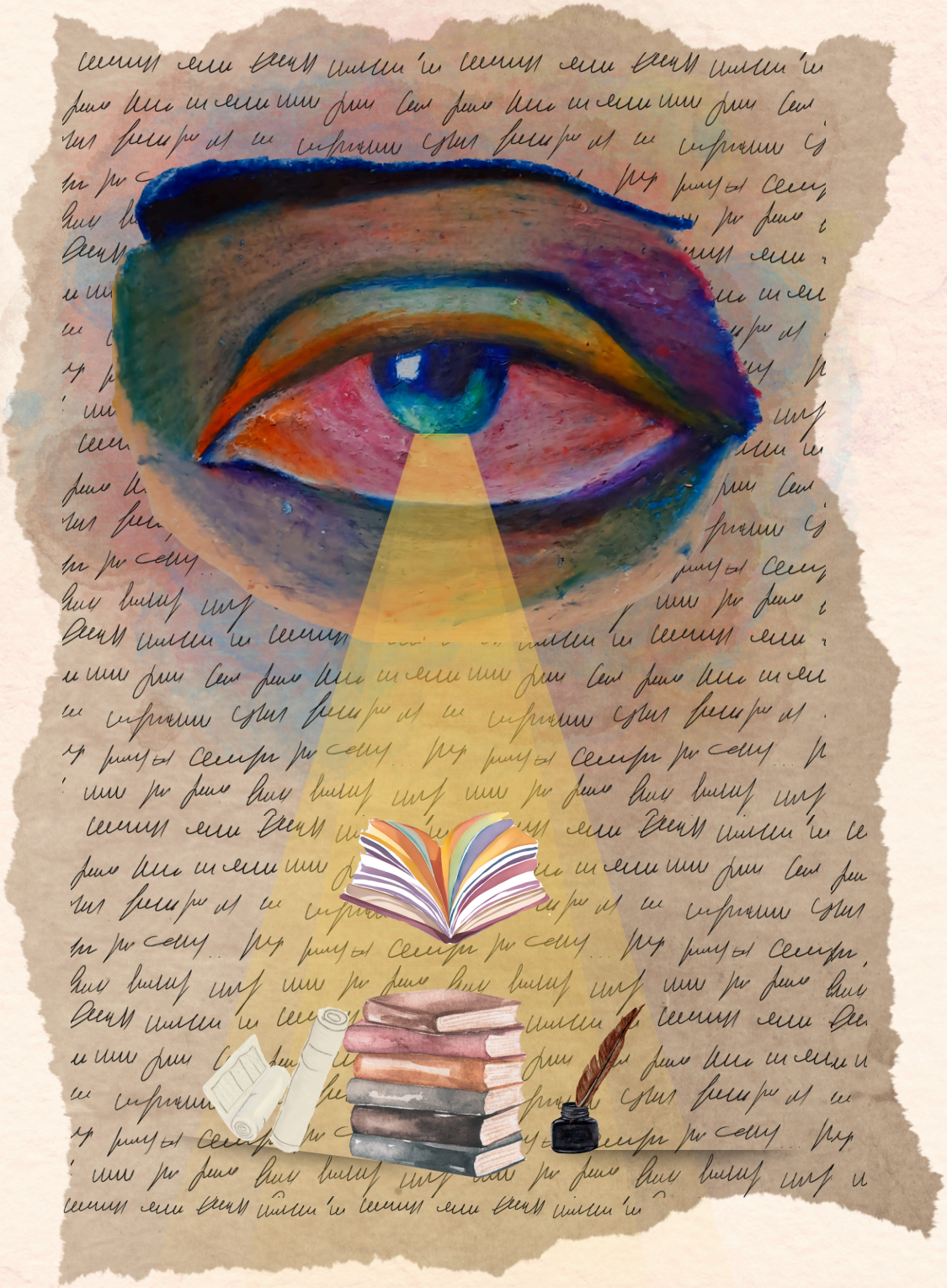
READING THE ARCHIVE

A GRADUATE JOURNAL IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



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Reading the Archive: Beginning of a Journey

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It is with great enthusiasm that we present the inaugural issue of *Reading the Archive*, a journal dedicated to platforming graduate research in history. As young scholars learn in their classrooms, history writing involves a dynamic engagement with sources, methodologies and interpretations. However, in the new digital age, the meaning of the archive itself is being reframed, with historians challenging and redefining the given understanding of the archive. In recent decades, a wide range of sources have become available to historians. These range from the standard colonial and post-colonial state records, personal diaries and memoirs, personal collections, private institutional collections, oral testimonies, visual materials and objects—significantly broadening the scope of what constitutes an "archive". These sources allow historians to shift from dominant to alternative narratives and recover hitherto neglected and marginalised voices.

Reading the Archive seeks to provide a space for rigorous, original research by graduate scholars who, on the one hand, utilise newer or understudied archival materials, or reinterpret already well-known sources. In platforming such research, we hope to contribute to creating an inclusive and pluralistic space that engages with the fragmentary nature of the archives while foregrounding the possibilities they hold. The journal recognises the unique position that graduate researchers hold. While they are often the first to discover ignored and untapped archives, they struggle to find platforms for publication. *Reading the Archives* seeks to address this gap by providing a dedicated platform for emerging historians to share their research with the broader academic community.

The contributions in this inaugural issue reflect the diversity of graduate research today. The publications are trans-temporal and interdisciplinary. The journal seeks to incorporate genres like academic research, photo articles, book and film reviews, commentaries and interviews—each bringing fresh

perspectives for our readers. This journal would not have been possible without the support of numerous partners who believed in this idea. We are grateful to Professor Salil Misra, Guest Editor for the inaugural issue, for constantly guiding the journal through its maiden issue. We extend our deepest gratitude to the editorial board, student editors and peer reviewers, whose generosity with time and expertise made the issue possible. Finally, our sincere thanks to our contributors, without whose scholarship the journal would not exist.

As *Reading the Archive* embarks on its journey, we hope to see it emerge as a collaborative space that pushes the boundaries of research, raises methodological questions and bridges disciplinary divides. Future issues will continue to expand on the frameworks created in the inaugural issue, with continuous questioning of archival boundaries. This is likely to be an exciting and evolving journey. We invite you to join us in this endeavour, as we explore the past with an eye toward the future.

History's Long Journey

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This introduction traces the evolving discipline of history, from its nineteenth century transformation under the influence of science, nationalism, and Eurocentrism to the critical interventions of the twentieth century that challenged its foundational assumptions. It examines how the rise of new perspectives—such as subaltern studies, narrative history, and critiques of the colonial archive—reshaped historical enquiry. The essay also highlights the impact of digital technology and democratisation on archival practices, opening new avenues for research while posing fresh challenges. It calls for a balanced approach that values both objectivity and narrative in the pursuit of historical knowledge.

Keywords: Historiography, archives, historical method, narrative turn, decolonisation, subaltern studies.

The online journal *Reading the Archives* (*RTA*) is an endeavour to represent the discipline of history in its large temporal and spatial expanse. This claim implies a recognition of history as a dynamic discipline that has grown very rapidly in the last two centuries and undergone seminal changes. It has also faced many challenges both from within and outside. Some of the challenges have created virtually an existential crisis for the discipline of history. Some other challenges have brought about opportunities by creating new directions for it. It is best to understand history as an old tradition of knowledge which metamorphosed into an integral component of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the trajectory of its growth was very similar to that of the social sciences. But it also faced challenges specific to history. The story of history is an interesting story in which it acquired different meanings and also very different orientations.

Ernest Gellner wrote on a general profile of the nineteenth century:

> The nineteenth century was the age of nationalism. It was also the age in which the great secular ideologies emerged, and it was the period during which the social sciences came into being. The three events are not unrelated. The turbulence and instability that were undermining the old order naturally led some men to try to understand what was happening, to investigate the very foundations of society, to grasp the principles of the new social forms which were emerging. It led others to try to change the world, or specify the directions in which it should change.[1]

Social sciences were born in nineteenth-century Europe. The nineteenth century was the period, and Europe the zone, that experienced the greatest transformation in human life. This was also the period when the entire world came under comprehensive European domination. Thus it was perhaps inevitable that a certain Eurocentrism was virtually the DNA of the new knowledge about human life that had begun developing in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, a certain notion/vision of universalism and historicism also went along with the Eurocentric orientation of the social sciences. Again, to quote Gellner:

> From the late eighteenth century onwards, the central, crucial fact facing the European mind, both perturbing and exhilarating, was the uniqueness of the newly emerging social and intellectual order of Western Europe. Europeans were struck primarily by the veritable chasm which was opening up between themselves and their own past. They also became aware of the similar gulf between themselves and the rest of the world. The two oppositions seemed linked, and it was only natural that, in due course, Europeans should come to think of their non-European contemporaries as *backward*, that is as resembling their own past.[2]

Thus, Eurocentrism, universalism, historicism and colonialism were all connected to one another and part of the new knowledge about human societies. At the same time, the scientific revolution and the Cartesian

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[1] Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vii.

[2] Gellner, *Culture, Identity and Politics*, 47.

intervention had created a new divide between science and philosophy: science was empirical, objective, and based on experiment. Philosophy, on the other hand, was speculative and metaphysical. The social sciences were inspired by both and were virtually rooted in this new epistemological separation. It was in this temporal and spatial matrix that history emerged in a new incarnation.

At one level, history obviously predated the social sciences. At another level, it was structurally linked to the social sciences. In pre-modern times, in different literate traditions, history carried multiple meanings and connotations. It could mean story, enquiry, philosophy, repository of truth, utilitarian resource, rhetoric, or literature.[3] In a remarkable passage on history writing, Lucian of Samosata wrote in the second century CE that history should be:

> …fearless, incorruptible, free, a friend of free expression and the truth, intent … on calling a fig a fig and a trough a trough, giving nothing to hatred and to friendship, sparing no one, showing neither pity nor shame nor obsequiousness, an impartial judge, well disposed to all men up to the point of not giving one side more than its due, in his books a stranger and a man without a country, independent, subject to no sovereign, not reckoning what this or that man will think, but stating the facts.[4]

The above statement is quite uncharacteristic for its times because of its insistence on objectivity, verging virtually on a cognitive exile. It was certainly not a part of the ways in which history was imagined in the pre-modern times. However, it was in the nineteenth century that objectivity became a central concern of history writing. Also, a great diversity of meanings regarding history began to be homogenised. A certain fixity was imparted to its meaning. History now meant an inquiry about the past, to understand the events of the past as they happened. This was more or less what was implied by the Sanskrit term "*Itihasa*". The past and its representation became indistinguishable from each other.

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[3] Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, *Historiography in the Modern World: Western and Indian Perspectives* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2016), 1–4.

[4] Upadhyay, *Historiography in the Modern World*, 6.

In this transition from diversity to standardisation, 'history' could sometimes be used in both its possible connotations – as past and as a representation of the past. So, when Gordon Childe wrote his famous book *What Happened in History* in 1942, he meant it in the former and older sense, history as past.[5] And when Winston Churchill made his equally famous statement – that history will be kind to him because he intended to write it[6] – he obviously meant it in the latter and the nineteenth-century sense of history as a view of the past. But it would be true to say that increasingly the latter meaning replaced the former meanings. It is history in this sense that the journal *RTA* is primarily concerned with.

History, in the sense of history writing or a particular representation of the past, may be seen and understood as a continuous tradition with many shifts and turns. The continuity of the tradition need not be mistaken to be static. Great shifts and 'turns' occurred within the tradition. The latter interventions were virtually in the form of a rebellion against the past. The first big rebellion against the past happened in the nineteenth century, when history acquired a great obsession with both accuracy and finality. The confidence regarding both accuracy and finality was obviously inspired by the natural sciences and a belief in the applicability of the scientific principles and procedures to history. History writing was professionalised.

In its earlier avatars, history had been part of literature or rhetoric. Now it was defined mainly in opposition to literature. The great concern now was to make clear what history was not. In the new imagination, certain binaries were created, and history's place was fixed in the binaries: History vs. Literature (fiction); Reality vs. Imagination; Narrative vs. Fact; Rhetoric (in which style matters) vs. Truth. History was de-rhetoricised. The imaginative dimension had to be purged out of history. History was to deal with the REAL, to capture the reality of the past as it really was. Subjectivity of any kind had no place in it and was to be kept out. Facts were to speak for themselves. The past was to be visible on its own, without the mediation of the historian. The identity of the historian was irrelevant to historical formulations. The historian was akin

[5] V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1942).

[6] Winston S. Churchill, House of Commons, 23 January 1948, in Richard M. Langworth, ed., *Churchill by Himself* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2015), 64.

to a scientist and the past was the laboratory. This was what was meant by subject-object separation.

This great shift may be identified as the first big turn in history. The new confidence on accuracy came with a new focus on the archives as the repository of knowledge and truth. The archives had existed even earlier, but now they were consecrated in the new orientation towards history. With Leopold Ranke, the archives began to be seen not just as repositories of records but of genuine and objective historical knowledge. At the same time, there was a new emphasis on the nation-state as the legitimate carrier and building block of history. The Eurocentrism of this view was quite obvious. The non-nation-states—in other words, colonies of Asia and Africa—and societies which did not have their own written records and archives were placed outside history proper.

History in the nineteenth century was part of the new knowledge/social sciences. The new knowledge consisted of a fairly compact, comprehensive and closed circle of interlocking ideas. Eurocentrism was only one part of the new edifice of knowledge. Nationalism, colonialism, scientism, ethnocentrism, evolutionism—all played their part and reinforced one another. The remarkable success of natural science conferred a certain prestige upon it, and it was only natural that this prestige would carry to the scientific method also. This enabled all the disciplines of social sciences to make claims that were very ambitious. At least four different claims emanated from within the social sciences. These was, to begin with a cognitive claim, associated with positivism. It grafted the natural world and its principles on the human world. Just as the natural world follows certain natural laws and one only needed to unearth those laws to make the natural world intelligible, so is the case with the human world. There are certain social laws of development, and a clue to those laws would unlock all the mysteries of human life. This indeed was a tall claim and came to be questioned later in the twentieth century.

There was also a transformative claim which argued that the purpose of social enquiry was to bring about a transformative change in the human condition. This was the essence of Karl Marx's famous claim: "Philosophers have so far

interpreted the world. The point is to change it."[7] This Marxian assertion, equally ambitious, did have the merit of reimagining a philosopher from a seer into an activist. There was also a predictive claim emanating from the same quarters. If all the social laws of development can be understood, they would indeed enable us to foresee and predict the direction in which human society would unfold. And finally, there was a therapeutic claim too, emanating from psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud asserted that all the major distortions in human behaviour were related to the working of certain psychic forces residing within humans.[8] An understanding of the mechanism of these forces could cure these distortions. All these claims – cognitive, transformative, predictive and therapeutic – were rooted in the same matrix and belonged to the same compact circle of interlocking and mutually reinforcing ideas. They were all questioned in the twentieth century.

If colonialism was an important factor in the structuring of the social sciences in the nineteenth century, it was decolonisation that fed into the twentieth-century ideas on the social sciences in general and history in particular. An overall democratisation also played its part. These democratic pressures began to show up in almost all the disciplines. In philosophy, ethnocentrism was seriously challenged by relativism. Just as the nineteenth-century social sciences were inspired by universalism, it was relativism that fed into twentieth-century social sciences. In Sociology ethno-methodology developed as a new analytical tool according to which ordinary people were to be seen as reflexive agents fully aware of the actions they were undertaking and of the implications of those actions. Anthropology began to depend much more on the observer-participant method rather than on ethnographic accounts. The ethnographic accounts began to be seen as unreliable. In history, the new focus was on 'history from below'.[9]

The effect of these interventions was particularly devastating for history. The entire range of ideas associated with nineteenth century history and very

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[7] Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 13.

[8] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966), 15–16.

[9] For more on this see Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "History from Below," *Social Scientist* 11, no. 4 (April 1983): 3–20.

central to it began to be swept aside. There was a plea for a return to the narrative form of history writing. There was virtually a narrative turn. It was argued that the events of the past do not have an innate meaning or form. These meanings are imparted in the process of narrative making. In that sense history shares something with literature. Imagination should play an important role in history writing. Moreover, narratives do not exist in an a priori manner. The act of making a narrative is inevitably a subjective one. Hence, the mirage of objectivity needs to be abandoned and subjectivity recognised as an important tool of history writing. All these were fundamental critiques of the ways in which history was conceptualised in the nineteenth-century.

Perhaps the most important critique was that of the archives as the repository of valid historical knowledge. In the new critique, the archives were seen as not a neutral unproblematic space. So many a priori assumptions went into the organisation of the archives. The nature of records, the selection of themes, the organisation of data created large blinkers which determined the very nature of the historical enquiry that was undertaken. Certain crucial dimensions of the past were excluded in an a priori manner in the archives-engendered history writing. As far as the colonies—now independent—were concerned, it was argued that these archives, being the creation of colonialism, contained at best the European knowledge about the non-European countries.

On the role of archives in structuring colonial knowledge, Nicholas Dirks has argued how, 'the [colonial] state literally produces, adjudicates, organizes, and maintains the discourses that become available as the primary texts of history'.[10] Upon this view, the study of modern and contemporary Indian history was particularly limited due to the overwhelming influence of the colonial archive. A similar questioning or archival history developed in Indian history writing also. The history writing during the initial decades after independence continued to be very dependent on the archives. But disenchantment with the archives emerged with the questioning of the 'history from above'. The rise of Subaltern historiography gave a new thrust to intellectual thought, and with new themes like caste, gender, and peasant issues finding resonance in the spectrum of historical enquiry, new archives in

[10] Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 43

the form of oral testimonies, autobiographies, folk memory, etc. emerged. Partition studies also created a new imagination of the archives.

In the new imagination, the archives were not simply the repositories of official records and therefore official versions of history. But the archives could also belong to people, containing their records and testimonies. In a similar vein, medieval historians started to pay more attention to hagiographies. On the other hand, textual studies in history transited from its orientalist formulations and obsession for seminal texts, to popular print culture and tract literature. In the production of new historical knowledge, a disenchantment with the older ways has been accompanied by a great reliance on the new ways, sources, and methods. It was thus that the thesis of the nineteenth-century was encountered by a powerful anti-thesis of the twentieth century, particularly during its second half. It created a crisis and put history writing on very shaky ground. Founding ideas of history—validity of the past, of events and of historical data—were all under siege. However, there is some evidence that after the thesis of the nineteenth century and a powerful anti-thesis of the twentieth century, there is now some synthesis and reconciliation, making it possible to retrieve and retain some of the older ways in the new orientation of history writing.

The reconciliation has the following architecture. The importance of objectivity is being recognised, not as a fact of historical enquiry, but as an aspiration worth pursuing. There is also a recognition that history and narrative are not mutually incompatible and can share a lot in common. History depends a great deal on the narrative. History is based on data and documents. Documents are traces of the past. The past is never available in a pure or even in a coherent form. It does, however, leave its traces behind. A narrative approach helps to organise those traces together, without compromising some of the pre-conditions of historical method. It is in this sense that reality in history is different from reality in fiction. The historian is much more constrained in constructing reality but is always enriched by the narrative device.

Yet another reconciliation has happened vis-a-vis the archives. The great disenchantment with the official archives and the emergence of information technology (IT) have imparted a new imagination to the idea of the archives

and fundamentally transformed the profile of the archives. The IT revolution has not only given a push towards digitisation and access, but has also de-centered the notion of the archive. The archive of today is not only limited to the official repository of knowledge but also includes what is being produced and consumed at the micro level of social structure. These shifts have led to an explosion of digital content which has made access to archives democratic. Newer directions towards data-analytics models have also opened up new directions for the imagination of archives for contemporary historians, opening newer vistas in genetic and linguistic studies. This has made the task of historians even more challenging. More than ever, historians are both reckoned with the challenges of the AI revolution and also the opportunities these newer mediums offer in expanding the pursuit of historical knowledge.

History today is an extremely dynamic discipline. It has grown along three axes. To begin with, there is more past to deal with. The total volume of the past is constantly increasing: the distant past is not diminishing and the recent times are constantly being added to the collective memory bank. For Indian history, this has the implication that whereas the focus on pre-historic and ancient India remains, the period after 1947 can no longer be left to political scientists and sociologists. Histories of independent India have to be written by historians. Second, new themes are constantly being added to historical enquiry. The same temporal zone is being looked at and analysed very differently. For Indian history writing of the last few decades, this means the welcome addition of themes such as caste, gender, and the environment. These themes have broadened the horizons of historical enquiry. Third, not only themes, but new perspectives and ways of looking at the past are asserting themselves and creating new challenges for the older, more established ways of looking at the past.

It is hoped that the *RTA* will represent this fascinating world of history and history writing in all its temporal depth and thematic diversity. It would welcome new research without in any way discouraging the older ways and concerns. It would provide a vibrant platform to young scholars from where they would share their findings with the larger community of historians and those interested in history.

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An Eye of Inquiry

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"An Eye of Inquiry" visualises the archive as a dynamic, interpretive space shared by historians, artists, and thinkers alike. Evoking memory, fragmentation, and inquiry, the artwork captures the archive's role beyond preservation, foregrounding its potential in shaping knowledge through perception, imagination, and active engagement with material remains.

Keywords: Archive, interpretation, inquiry, visual representation, knowledge production.

Bernard S. Cohn points to "Archives" as one of the three places where historians are found in their professional capacities.[1] But, I also visualize them as realms where amateur capacities can be explored as well, since we, or probably only I, mostly live in the past. This cover illustration, baptised as "An Eye of Inquiry," tries to capture the essence of the profound relationship between not just the archive and historians, but also journalists, researchers, writers, and artists involved in the praxis of interpreting, uncovering, or simply engaging with tangible or intangible material. The inspiration for the design dawned during one of my occasional, inconsequential flickerings through my old Instagram handle's archived stories. Technically, a non-professional personal digital archive of memories, it now left me wondering about the serendipity of designing a cover page from my archived artwork. God is great indeed. Don't worry, I am not about to go off on a tangent.

At the heart of this cover page lies an artistic eye anchored to a sublime background in the hues of brown. This eye (Figure 1), with a potent and introspective gaze, is not merely a yielding organ of sight. It extends beyond the threshold of simple reading and empirical observation, and rather

[1] Bernard S. Cohn, "An Anthropologist among the Historians: A Field Study," in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3-5.

represents an assertive agency of understanding, perceiving, and interpreting material to produce useful knowledge. Moreover, the rich tinctures of blue, red, and orange try to add depth to this dimension. To convey an association between the archive and its material, albeit not limited to it, there descends a metaphorical beam of light from the eye's curvature illuminating the archival material. With the ray cascading on the raised book and other elements, the overall composition tries to convey the consumption of raw ideas from the quintessential vessels of knowledge to ultimately produce new scholarship.

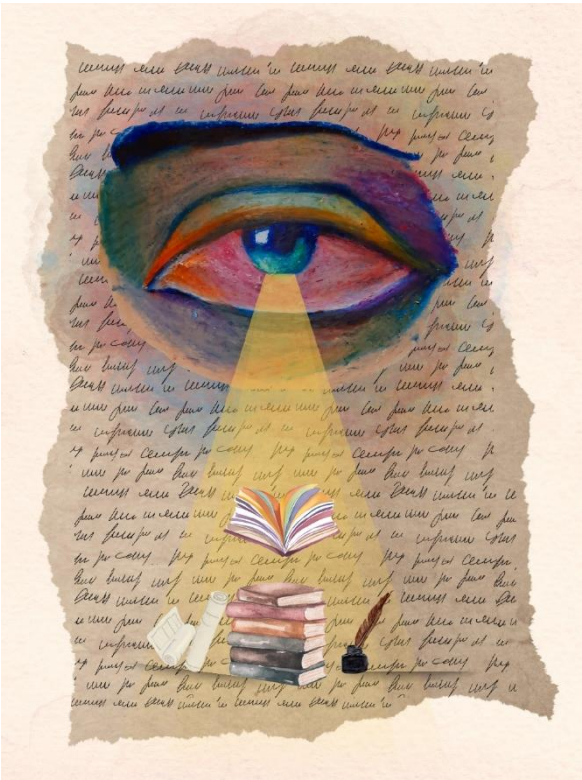

Figure 1: An Eye of Inquiry

The background of the central piece is minimalistic yet evocative, contributing towards the synthesis of the overall concept of the archive. It, therefore, uses an element of torn fragments of a scripture to convey the notion of lacuna that people face when dealing with archival materials, often leaving the conclusions fractured and researchers frustrated. Simultaneously, it highlights the often-neglected reality of the archive and the patience necessary for its in-depth analysis. It also acknowledges an ever-dynamic and continuously evolving space of new ideas and avenues with a fixed gaze of inquiry. This

central piece is juxtaposed with the background of water-based light parchment paper tone, done not only to make it visually appealing but also to create an immersive or transportive feeling of being in a warm archive.

Finally, acknowledging the importance of breaking the surface tension through a gaze of inquiry, delving beyond the realm of what is known, to learn, unlearn, and relearn through a dialogue with archives as agents of primary meaning-making to produce knowledge is what constitutes "An Eye of Inquiry". Hence, for a journal dedicated to fostering a unique perspective on archives within the humanities and social sciences, where archives should not be treated as mere repositories, this work of art conspicuously tries to encapsulate what "Reading the Archive" entails in its entirety.

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Marginalisation of Ambedkar and the Scheduled Castes Federation in the Process of the Transfer of Power

SHAHEEN IQBAL KHAN
Independent Scholar

The Indian National Movement also witnessed a movement of Dalit politics towards freedom from hierarchical social constructs, led by leaders like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Scheduled Castes Federation. However, despite being officially recognised as significant representatives of Scheduled Castes for a long period, the Cabinet Mission sidelined them. This paper explores the diminishing legitimacy of Ambedkar and the Scheduled Castes Federation, looking at the process of transfer of power through Ambedkar's lens.

Keywords: Dalit, Scheduled Castes Federation, B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit politics, transfer of power

Introduction

"Political tyranny is nothing compared to the social tyranny and a reformer who defies society is a more courageous man than a politician who defies Government."[1]

- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

The Indian National Movement witnessed various movements within it. Along with the struggle for independence from the British, there was a struggle by Dalits[2] for freedom from the hierarchical structure of the Hindu community. The flag bearers of this struggle were fragmented at regional

[1] B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, ed. S. Anand, intro. Arundhati Roy (London: Verso, 2016), 41.

[2] The low and untouchable castes of the Hindu community, officially termed as 'Depressed Classes' were referred to as 'Scheduled Castes' in the Government of India Act of 1935. This dissertation interchangeably uses the terms untouchables, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Dalit. The term 'Dalit' was not used during the period I have covered, however, I will be using it as the term is preferably used in contemporary academic writings.

levels until the establishment of the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942 by B.R. Ambedkar. The leader aimed to secure political, social, and economic safeguards for the Dalit community and empower future generations to break free from the rigid caste system.

Ambedkar's stance on the Dalits being a separate entity led to conflicts with leaders like Gandhi, the Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, and the Depressed Classes League, who viewed the Dalits as part of the Hindu community. Despite strong opposition, Ambedkar remained steadfast in his demands, and was recognised by the British as the sole representative of the Scheduled Castes during some part of the transfer of power process. However, as the British prepared to leave India, they abandoned Ambedkar, even withdrawing recognition of the Scheduled Castes as a separate entity.

It is insufficient to simply state that the Cabinet Mission ignored Ambedkar's demands for Scheduled Castes' safeguards. While the views of the British government, Congress, and Muslim League were carefully considered, Ambedkar's extensive writings and speeches were largely dismissed. From the MacDonald Award, where the British sought Ambedkar's consent, to Cripps recognising him as the All India Scheduled Castes Federation's representative, to Wavell considering him less influential, and finally, to his marginalisation in the Cabinet Mission, Ambedkar's legitimacy as a Dalit leader steadily declined. This paper examines whether this shift was an outcome of the elections of 1945-46, used by the British to justify the Cabinet Mission Proposals or a move from Ambedkar's vision of Dalits as a separate entity towards Gandhi's integrationist view began even earlier.

As the voice of the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar played a key role in securing the Communal Award of 1932. Despite Gandhi's opposition to the MacDonald Award, the British insisted on Ambedkar's consent before making any changes. This led to negotiations with the Congress and the eventual Poona Pact[3], which many saw as a victory for Ambedkar due to the increase in

[3] The Poona Pact, concluded on 24 September 1932, was a compromise between Hindu leaders and representatives of the Depressed Classes that revised the British Communal Award of 4 August 1932. It expanded the number of reserved seats for the Depressed Classes from 71 to 148. However, instead of separate electorates, these representatives were to be elected through a joint electorate of both caste Hindus and Depressed Class voters. Candidates

reserved seats for Dalits. However, Ambedkar viewed it as a setback, believing that representatives from reserved constituencies would lack accountability towards the Dalit electorate.[4] He argued that these politicians would become "a champion of the minority… a slave of the majority," compromising their ability to represent the Dalit interests effectively.[5]

The Poona Pact of 1932 brought the issue of Dalit representation to the forefront of colonial India's political discourse, marking a shift towards recognising the political agency of Dalits and their struggle for equitable participation. It also solidified Ambedkar's position as a prominent Dalit leader, since the British considered his views before passing and amending the MacDonald Award. The Government of India Act of 1935 reserved legislative seats for the Scheduled Castes, strengthening Dalit politics and giving them a platform to voice their demands. This led to the rise of two political factions within the Dalit community—one aligning with the Congress Party and participating in the national movement, led by Babu Jagjivan Ram, and the other advocating for an independent, autonomous platform for Dalits, led by B.R. Ambedkar.

In the *Nationalist Movement in India*, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay notes that while the Congress assumed power in eight provinces in 1937, it lacked a concrete strategy to address untouchability beyond Gandhi's efforts and previous legislations. Its two-year rule under the Government of India Act of 1935 disappointed both secular socialists like Nehru and Dalit leaders like Ambedkar. Although there were Scheduled Caste members in the cabinets of Assam, Bihar, and Madras, their influence on reforms was minimal. Except in Bombay, where Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party secured most

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were to be chosen from a list of four, drawn through a preliminary vote open only to Depressed Class electors. The agreement was largely driven by Mahatma Gandhi, who, while imprisoned in Poona, strongly opposed separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, viewing them as part of the Hindu society. To protest the Award, he began a fast unto death on 20 September, compelling both parties to negotiate. The British government formally approved the Pact on 26 September 1932. For details, see Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), 284–85.

[4] Francesca R. Jensenius, "Mired in Reservations: The Path-Dependent History of Electoral Quotas in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (December 4, 2014): 96.

[5] Ram Samujh, *Reservation Policy: Its Relevance in Modern India* (Mumbai: Samrudh Bharat Publication, 2005), 59.

reserved seats, Scheduled Caste representatives were largely aligned with the Congress.[6]

Given its focus on Gandhian principles like temple entry and changing caste-Hindu attitudes, Congress was unlikely to pass mandatory legislation for untouchable rights. However, Madras and Bombay took more active measures against untouchability. In Bombay, Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party—the main opposition to the Congress—proposed reforms on labour, agriculture, and education, but these were dismissed. In Madras, Chief Minister Rajagopalachari introduced four bills, primarily addressing temple entry and civil rights for Harijans.[7]

Reginald Coupland noted that the Congress provincial governments showed no greater commitment to addressing untouchability than previous administrations.[8] Even Dalit leaders, inclined towards the Congress, felt alienated.[9] For instance, M.C. Rajah advocated for a separate Harijan party after his Temple Entry Bill[10] was rejected by both the Congress and Dalits.[11] Ambedkar was openly critical of the Congress in Bombay, while in Bengal, the Muslim-majority province, Congress, led by Subhash and Sarat Chandra Bose, secured support from Dalit leaders. The Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, backed by Congress, gained more influence, while the Federation's provincial branch struggled.[12]

Bandyopadhyay notes the fragmented nature of Dalit politics, with the Congress and the Federation constantly competing for exclusive

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[6] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Nationalist Movement in India: A Reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 228.

[7] *Indian Annual Register*, 1938, vol. 1, 143.

[8] Reginald Coupland, *The Indian Problem. Part II, "Indian Politics, 1936–42* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), 145.

[9] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power and the Crisis of Dalit Politics in India, 1945–47," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (October 2000): 899–900.

[10] "Plea for Separate Harijan Party," paper clipping, in *M. C. Rajah Papers*, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) New Delhi.

[11] Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power," 902.

[12] For details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 173–209.

representation, preventing the emergence of a unified movement.[13] He argues that the Congress's attempt to integrate Dalit politics towards the end of colonial rule was rooted in a deeper crisis of patronage and legitimacy that emerged during the transfer of power.[14] This crisis, described by Kamalakant Chitre in 1952, intensified as Ambedkar found himself compelled to negotiate with a party he had previously criticised.[15] According to Bandyopadhyay, this situation arose partly from the organisational weakness of the Scheduled Castes Federation and its inability to challenge Congress's dominance or critique the majoritarian version of nationalism effectively.[16]

In her book *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, Gail Omvedt contends that the Congress, largely controlled by the Brahmins and the bourgeoisie, aimed to appropriate Dalit politics to weaken Ambedkar's influence. She notes that the declaration of independence and partition pushed Ambedkar to ally with the Congress. His preference for a strong, centralised state over the Muslim League's decentralised federal model also shaped his decision.[17] Some scholars see this alliance as a success of Congress's integrationist approach. Eleanor Zelliot describes it as a "remarkable act of political generosity,"[18] while M.S. Gore suggests that, with the Muslim question resolved, bringing Ambedkar into the fold became crucial for addressing untouchability. For Ambedkar, cooperation with the government provided a way to address Dalit issues constructively while maintaining some independence.[19]

Previous works primarily focus on Congress's efforts to secure Dalit representation and the crisis faced by Dalit politics during the transfer of power. This dissertation aims to explore the historical context that led Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders to establish the Scheduled Castes

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[13] Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power," 900.

[14] Ibid., 895.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), 304.

[18] Eleanor Zelliot, "Congress and the Untouchables, 1917-1959," in *Congress and Indian Nationalism: The Pre-Independence Phase*, ed. Richard Sisson and Stanley Wolpert (University of California Press, 1988), 193-94.

[19] M. S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 180-83.

Federation (SCF) as a centralised organisation. The SCF's goal extended beyond securing political safeguards, it sought to create opportunities for future Dalit generations to become economically strong and educated. This study approaches the issue from Ambedkar's perspective as a Dalit who faced socio-economic challenges, earned his education through immense effort, and stood out in a society dominated by caste Hindus. Unlike financially strong parties backed by organisational funds, the SCF emerged from Ambedkar's determination to prevent future generations from enduring the discrimination he experienced. It was not a pursuit of power or privilege but a fight for a secure and equitable future for the Dalit community.

Recognising the Representatives of Scheduled Castes

Dalit politics was divided between the All India Scheduled Castes Federation and Jagjivan Ram's All India Depressed Class League, raising the question of who truly represented the Dalits. The Cripps Mission of 1942 addressed this by inviting political representatives to discuss India's Constitution. Several regional Dalit leaders, aligned with Ambedkar, sought direct engagement with Sir Stafford Cripps, challenging other organisations' claims of sole representation. However, Cripps limited discussions to provincial delegations, inviting Ambedkar and Rao Bahadur M.C. Rajah as national representatives of the Depressed Classes. This recognition legitimised Ambedkar, provoking resentment from the League. In response, League secretary Jamuna Ram insisted that Ambedkar could not represent all Dalits and Jagjivan Ram should be included.[20] General Secretary Prithvi Singh Azad further warned that excluding the League would cast doubt on the British Government's sincerity.[21]

Despite such strong appeals, Cripps replied that he regretted his inability 'to grant interviews to representatives of individual organisations.'[22] On April 2,

[20] Sir S. Cripps, "Note on Interview with the Jam Saheb and Maharaja of Bikaner, 26 March 1942," L/P&J/10/4: f 19, in Nicholas Mansergh, ed., *Transfer of Power 1942-1947*, vol. 1 (London: HMSO, 1970–1977), 487.

[21] "Prithvi Singh Azad to Sir Stafford Cripps, 28 March 1942," in Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power," 901.

[22] "LB. C.A. Cook, Private Secretary to Sir Stafford Cripps to Prithvi Singh Azad, 29 March 1942." Ibid., 901.

the League's Working Committee, chaired by Jagjivan Ram, formally expressed its discontent. It issued a memorandum asserting itself as 'the only representative body of the Depressed Classes,' accusing Cripps of undermining democratic principles and following a divide-and-rule strategy. The League insisted that the Depressed Classes were a part of Hindu society, condemning 'separatist mentality' and vowing to resist any attempts to 'disintegrate Hindu society.'[23]

This claim was contentious. Even in Azad's province, the Punjab Provincial Depressed Classes Association expressed their discontent with 'pro-Hindu' leaders like Azad and believed that Scheduled Castes were 'racially and culturally different from all,' further extending their confidence and support to Rajah and Ambedkar. Likewise, the Punjab Balmiki Depressed Classes League stated that the 'Depressed Classes are neither Hindus nor want to be Hindus,' criticising leaders like Azad and Ram. By 1942, Dalit organisations were divided, but the colonial government recognised Ambedkar's Federation, while the Congress-backed League struggled for legitimacy. Within four years, this dynamic would shift, with Ambedkar himself facing marginalisation.

Ambedkar and Dalit organisations initially relied on the colonial government for political and civil rights. However, after meeting Cripps, they recognised a shift in patronage, placing them 'under an unmitigated system of Hindu rule.'[24]Ambedkar rejected the Cripps proposals, calling them a 'defeatist surrender to the Congress and Muslim League,'[25,] and for failing to protect Scheduled Castes' political rights. On December 10, 1942, the Special Scheduled Castes Political Conference in Allahabad declared that 'India…[was] not a nation but…a constellation of nations.' While earlier agreements had recognised Scheduled Castes as a distinct entity, the Cripps

[23] Ibid., 902.

[24] "B. R. Ambedkar and M. C. Rajah to Stafford Cripps, 1 April 1942," in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power,* vol. 1, 603.

[25] B.R. Ambedkar, "Summary of Statement by Dr. Ambedkar, 5 April 1942," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* [hereafter *BAWS*], ed. Vasant Moon vol. 17, part II (New Delhi: Dr Ambedkar Foundation, 2020), 171–78.

Mission's proposals ignored their concerns, prioritising the future constitution of Caste Hindus.[26]

In a memorandum to Linlithgow, Ambedkar outlined his concerns about the Cripps proposals, highlighting two ways to protect minority rights: either through a Constituent Assembly or a Treaty. He opposed the treaty model, arguing that it was incompatible with dominion status. He also feared that the Hindu majority in the Constituent Assembly would deny Dalits minority status. Under a joint electorate, Hindus could easily secure all 151 reserved seats in provincial assemblies, controlling the 15 Dalit seats in the Constituent Assembly. Despite Dalits not participating in the Congress-led subversive movements, attempts were made to include them in order to present the party as their legitimate representatives. The British government, prioritising the Congress's demands, neglected the interests of the Dalit community, raising doubts about whether the Cripps proposals had been entirely abandoned.[27]

Ambedkar's fears were largely realised as British patronage shifted towards the Congress. Colonial officials noted that the weakness of the Scheduled Castes was their unclear identity, suggesting their welfare would be easier to address if they converted to either Christianity or Islam. Remaining Hindus, they argued, meant that progress depended on social integration rather than political safeguards.[28] This shift reflected a broader trend of prioritising religious identities in political decision-making. The Gandhian view of Dalit assimilation into Hindu society gained traction, sidelining Dalits as an independent political force. The transfer of power increasingly favoured religiously defined groups, undermining Ambedkar's vision of securing Dalit rights beyond the Hindu framework.

By 1942-43, Linlithgow still regarded Ambedkar as 'the right and only proper representative of the Depressed Classes,'[29] leading to his appointment as a Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council. In response to the

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[26] Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power," 903.

[27] "The Marquess of Linlithgow to Mr. Amery, 11 January 1943, MSS. EUR. F. 125/12," in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power,* vol. 3, 488.

[28] "Mr. Amery to the Marquess of Linlithgow, 8 February 1943." Ibid., 633–34.

[29] "Telegram from Linlithgow to Amery, 20 Feb 1942," in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power,* vol. 1, 211.

Viceroy's request, Ambedkar submitted a memorandum highlighting the issues of the Scheduled Castes and demanding government action. He reminded the administration of its duty towards them, noting that they comprised 'between a sixth and a seventh' of India's population and argued that recognising two substantial minorities could prevent the state from being labelled 'pro-Muslim' or 'anti-Hindu.'[30] The following year, some concessions were granted to the Scheduled Castes.[31]

As British departure became imminent, Ambedkar demanded that the transfer of power be delayed until the Depressed Classes were 'elevated in education, economic conditions and social position' to match other sections of society.[32] Though he knew this was unrealistic, he sought to keep Scheduled Caste rights central to his political negotiations. The British still viewed Ambedkar as important, but Indian leaders were less willing to accommodate him. On 5 August, the Secretary of State informed the Viceroy that post-war freedom would be conditional on a constitution approved by all 'main elements of India's national life,' including the Depressed Classes.[33] Wavell conveyed this to Gandhi on 15 August.[34] Both Gandhi and the Muslim League resisted Dalit inclusion in political discussions. Gandhi saw untouchability as a social and religious issue rather than a political one, sidelining Ambedkar.

During the Gandhi-Jinnah talks, Ambedkar repeatedly stressed that the Scheduled Castes were the third essential party alongside Hindus and Muslims, and could not be incorporated into Pakistan without their consent.[35] At a meeting held in Hyderabad, he asserted that political power rightly

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[30] "Mr. Amery to the Marquess of Linlithgow, 16 Dec 1942, MSS. EUR. F. 125/11," in Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power,* vol. 3, 389-90.

[31] They got an additional seat in the Central Assembly, reservation in the Indian Civil Services, reservation of 8.5 per cent in recruitment to the Central Services, reservation for technical training in certain government institutions and an allocation of Rs. 3 lakhs for scholarships for technical training in India and abroad.

[32] *The Hindu*, 26 September 1944, paper cutting, in *Ambedkar Papers*, File No. 103, NMML, New Delhi.

[33] "Telegram of Mr Amery to Field Marshal Viscount Wavell, 5 August 1944, L/P&J/8/519: ff 120-1," Mansergh, ed., *The Transfer of Power,* vol. 4, 1166-68.

[34] "Amery to Wavell, 5 Aug 1944." Ibid., 1166-68.

[35] B.R. Ambedkar, "Depressed Classes are not a part of Hindu Community," in Moon, ed., *BAWS*, vol. 17, part III, 310.

belonged to Hindus, Muslims, and Scheduled Castes, and none could be denied their place.[36] His insistence on Dalits' recognition in the transfer of power process led to accusations that he was indifferent to India's independence.[37] Rejecting this, Ambedkar declared that Dalits sought 'the independence of their community along with the independence of the country.' These allegations likely stemmed from his reliance on British support, as he viewed the colonial government as the only means through which Dalits could achieve their aspirations.

Establishment and Resolutions of the Scheduled Castes Federation

Ambedkar founded the All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF) in Nagpur after the Cripps Mission rejected the separate representation for Scheduled Castes in 1942. Following the Depressed Classes Conference (18-20 July), he criticised the proposals, stating they placated the Congress and the Muslim League while leaving Dalits 'bound hand and foot and handed over to the Caste Hindus.'[38] During the conference, a resolution was passed to establish a centralised organisation for the Scheduled Castes. President Rao Bahadur N. Sivaraj chaired the drafting committee, which submitted its report for approval. Key Dalit leaders, including Rai Saheb Shamlal (United Provinces), D.G. Jadhav (Bombay), and Rai Saheb N.C. Dhusia (Bengal), contributed to the resolution.[39] Acknowledging the fragmentation of Dalit politics, Shamlal stressed the need for a structured programme. Jadhav proposed forming the AISCF as a 'Central political organisation for carrying on the political movement of the Scheduled Castes,' urging local Dalit organisations to merge into the Federation.[40]

Rai Saheb N.C. Dhusya stressed that maintaining a separate identity for the Depressed Classes required unity.[41] Dalit leaders, recognising the strength of

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[36] Ibid., 311.

[37] Moon, ed., *BAWS*, vol. 17, part III, 310.

[38] B.R. Ambedkar, "The Cripps Proposals on Constitutional Advancement," in *Ambedkar Writes*, vol. 1: *Political Writings*, ed. Narendra Jadhav (New Delhi & Seattle: Konark Publishers, 2014), 193.

[39] *Report of the Proceedings of the Third Session of the All India Depressed Classes Conference* held at Nagpur on July 18 and 19, 1942, 6.

[40] *Report of the Proceedings*, 5.

[41] Ibid., 43-44.

Caste Hindus under Congress and Muslims under the League, prioritised unity over 'petty quarrels' to avoid dependence on the 'goodwill of the Caste Hindus'.[42] In his concluding address, Ambedkar highlighted the extreme poverty of the Depressed Classes, contrasting it with the relative prosperity of Muslims, who had ruled before the British and were economically ahead. He urged Dalits to rely solely on their efforts for progress.[43] From its inception, the Scheduled Castes Federation aimed to centralise Dalit representation while fostering self-reliance, avoiding comparisons with the Muslim minority, which Ambedkar saw as economically stronger.

The next day, Ambedkar joined the Governor-General's Executive Council, viewing it as 'a death blow to Brahmanism' and a 'great victory for the untouchables.' Acknowledging that his availability would be limited, he urged other leaders to advance the Federation's cause.[44] Addressing the Federation's limited reach compared to the Congress, he cited the latter's dominance in the press and its vast financial resources. Congress had amassed 'one crore rupees,' which Ambedkar identified as the 'secret of its success.' He emphasised the need for financial stability to compete with well-organised political entities.[45] The Federation aimed to establish the Scheduled Castes as a distinct entity in Indian national life, securing their political, economic, and social rights.[46] Ambedkar, having experienced caste discrimination first-hand, sought constitutional safeguards to protect Dalits.[47]

At a Working Committee meeting held in Madras on 23 September 1944, presided over by N. Sivaraj, the SCF outlined its "Political Demands of the Scheduled Castes".[48] While the Congress and the Muslim League negotiated India's future, the SCF sought to ensure the recognition of Dalit interests. The resolution asserted that the Scheduled Castes were a separate religious

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[42] D.G. Jadhav said this while proposing Resolution V for the establishment of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation. Ibid., 43.

[43] "B.R. Ambedkar, Concluding Address," in ibid., 45.

[44] Ibid., 45.

[45] Ibid., 46.

[46] Ibid., 109.

[47] Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2023).

[48] B.R. Ambedkar, "What the Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables," in Moon, ed., *BAWS*, vol. 9, Appendix XI, 346.

minority, more so than Sikhs and Muslims, under the Cripps Proposals.[49] It refused to accept the Indian Constitution unless it guaranteed separate electorates and public service reservations. Additionally, the SCF demanded 'separate settlements' for Dalits, enabling them to live apart from caste Hindus, with a Settlement Commission facilitating land purchases.[50] This, they argued, would protect Dalits from potential oppression under Swaraj.[51]

The SCF's demands mirrored the Muslim League's push for Pakistan, advocating for a distinct political identity. Ambedkar, at an SCF meeting in Bombay on 6 May 1945, reiterated his demand for a constitution 'framed by Indians for Indians and with the voluntary consent of Indians,' rejecting dominance by powerful sections. He opposed majority rule, which he deemed unjust in a country where the majority was communal, not political. He described it as a 'permanent majority fixed in its attitude,' incapable of being restructured. To counter this, he called for equal proportions in the central and provincial assemblies for Hindus, Muslims, and Scheduled Castes and insisted that the executive branch must include minorities, not just the legislative majority.[52]

Ambedkar's proposals aimed to reduce communal tensions and reassure Muslims by preventing majoritarian dominance. He envisioned a 'United India' governed by a 'rule of unanimity,' where legislative and executive decisions required broad consensus. He warned that ignoring these concerns could jeopardize independence. Criticising the Hindu majority for portraying minorities as obstacles while resisting genuine concessions, Ambedkar stressed that minorities would support independence if their rights were protected.[53] In this context, Ambedkar advocated a tripartite constitution to ensure governance by 'free, independent, and important elements in the national life of the country.' This underscored his vision for a political structure that safeguarded minority rights and prevented majoritarian rule.

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[49] *Political Demands of Scheduled Castes 1944* (SCF), accessed June 6, 2024, https://www.constitutionofindia.net/historical-constitution/political-demands-of-scheduled-castes-scheduled-castes-federation1944/.

[50] *Political Demands of Scheduled Castes 1944* (SCF).

[51] Ibid.

[52] Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Moon, ed., *BAWS*, vol. I, 360, 368-69, 373, 376-78.

[53] Ibid.

Ambedkar remained vocal about the status of Dalits in independent India and its constitution. Although initially recognised as the leader of the Scheduled Castes, his legitimacy began to decline as India's political scenario evolved. Wavell noted that while the Depressed Classes followed Ambedkar, his influence was limited.[54] Yet, in October 1944, when considering a 'transitional government' that included all political organisations, Wavell acknowledged Ambedkar as the leader of the Depressed Classes.[55] Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru also consulted Ambedkar for nominating Dalit representatives to the sub-committee for Scheduled Castes.[56] The Sapru Committee Report (1945), formed by the Non-Party Conference of November 1944, aimed to address minority issues in India's constitutional framework. Chaired by Sapru, the committee included 30 members distinguished in public affairs, deliberately excluding representatives from dominant political parties.

The report rejected the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, advocating for a constitution-making body with equal representation for Muslims and Hindus. It recommended joint electorates with reserved seats and proposed a Minorities Commission to assess minority welfare. Additionally, it suggested fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, press, religion, and equality, urging the constitution-making body to clearly define these rights. While the report discussed the idea of dividing rights into justiciable and non-justiciable, it made no specific recommendations.[57] Initially, Ambedkar was open to

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[54] "Appreciation of the Indian Political Situation by His Excellency the Viceroy, February 1944," in *Transfer of Power*, vol. 4, 884-93.

[55] "Telegram from Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Mr. Amey, 5 Oct 1944, L/P&J/8/520: f. 223." Ibid., 85-86.

[56] Tej Bahadur Sapru, *Constitutional Proposals of the Sapru Committee*, 6.

[57] Norman Brown, a prominent Indologist, noted in his 1946 publication India's Constitutional Issues that the Sapru Committee Report presented a comprehensive and sustained discussion of constitutional matters. However, scholars have suggested that the report was largely ignored and failed to influence key political actors. Ray T. Smith, in his 1968 article The Role of Indian Liberals in the National Movement, 1915-1947, argued that the report received little attention. V.P. Menon, in his work, The Transfer of Power in India, attributed the Muslim League's hostility towards the report to the absence of a high-ranking Muslim member and the rejection of Pakistan and separate electorates. The Congress also remained indifferent to the report. R.A. Wilson reviewed the report in 1946 for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, stating that in a less communal atmosphere, the report might have garnered the approval of thinking Indians and served as a basis for future constitutional

collaborating with the committee, but upon sensing bias against minority communities, he became more cautious and reserved.[58] He likely feared that the committee's deliberations would overlook the concerns of the minorities he represented. By distancing himself, Ambedkar aimed to avoid legitimising a process he viewed as prejudiced. This shift reflects his dedication to protecting the rights of marginalised communities, even if it meant stepping back from the committee's proceedings.

The Sapru Conciliation Committee failed largely due to Jinnah's refusal to cooperate. Despite this setback, Ambedkar remained the primary representative of the Dalit community, affirming his leadership in the political sphere. Although Gandhi saw Dalits as part of the Hindu community, they were acknowledged as a distinct and significant group, and Ambedkar was often consulted on matters concerning their representation. However, this period also marked a shift in Dalit representation, signalling a decline in Ambedkar's vision of a 'rule of unanimity.'

The Shift in Patronage Unveils

On 14 June 1945, Wavell proposed forming an 'entirely Indian' Executive Council, excluding only the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, and including all 'main communities' of India, explicitly recognising the Scheduled Castes.[59] This recognition affirmed their status as a distinct and significant group in political discussions. However, the move faced criticism from the Hindu Mahasabha, Congress, and from leaders like Gandhi. The Hindu Mahasabha saw it as a threat to Hindu unity by separating the Scheduled Castes from caste Hindus.[60] Congress used its media to counter claims that it represented only caste Hindus, while Gandhi argued that

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discussions. Although the report was initially ignored or criticized, it is possible that it had an indirect impact on the constitution-making process. Seven members of the Sapru Committee went on to join the Constituent Assembly, including M.R. Jayakar, Gopalaswami Ayyangar, John Mathai, Frank Anthony, and Sachidananda Sinha, who became the first provisional chairman of the Constituent Assembly.

[58] B.R. Ambedkar, "Dr. Ambedkar to Field Marshal Viscount Wavell, 7 June 1945," in Moon, ed., *BAWS*, vol. 10, 476-77.

[59] "Broadcast speech by His Excellency the Viceroy at New Delhi on 14 June 1945, L/P&J/8/524: ff. 7-8," in Mansergh, ed., *Transfer of Power*, vol. 5, 1122-24.

[60] "Press Report, 15 June 1945." Ibid., 1125-26.

Congress was a national, non-communal party, criticising any attempt to divide caste Hindus from others.[61]

Despite opposition, Wavell invited Ambedkar to represent the Scheduled Castes at the Simla Conference, but Ambedkar declined, recommending N. Sivaraj as a substitute.[62] He criticised the proposed Executive Council for its inadequate representation of Scheduled Castes, condemning the allocation of "five seats to 90 million Muslims, one seat to 50 million Untouchables, and one seat to 6 million Sikhs." Ambedkar found this distribution unjust and inconsistent with his principles of fairness. He also accused the British of failing to act as 'trustees for the Scheduled Castes,' treating them unfairly and disregarding their commitment to protect Dalit interests.[63]

The Executive Council was to include fourteen Indian members, and Ambedkar sought at least two Dalit representatives. Wavell feared that agreeing to this might lead Sikhs and Indian Christians to make similar demands and anticipated Gandhi's disapproval.[64] However, the Secretary of State showed more empathy, considering the numerous telegrams from Dalit organisations requesting three seats. To navigate Gandhi's likely opposition, the Secretary suggested selecting members based on party affiliation rather than community representation, reasoning that Gandhi could not deny the existence of Ambedkar's political party.[65] Ambedkar's firm demands reflected his awareness of shifting colonial patronage. While the British still recognised him as the legitimate representative of the Dalit community, some officials began to question this acknowledgement.

The Simla Conference failed due to disagreements between the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League over Muslim representation in the executive council. Jinnah insisted that only League members could represent Muslims, seeking recognition as their sole

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[61] "Wavell to Amery, Secret Report on Simla Conference, 15 July 1945, L/P&J/8/524: ff 22-4." Ibid., 1258-63.

[62] B.R. Ambedkar, "Ambedkar to Wavell, Proposal for representation of Scheduled Castes in the Executive Council, New Delhi, 7 June 1945," in Moon, ed., *BAWS*, vol. 17 part 2, 167.

[63] Ibid., 169.

[64] "Telegram from Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Mr Amery, 8 June 1945, L/P&J/8/522: f 194," in Mansergh, ed., *Transfer of Power*, vol. 5, 1102-03.

[65] "Telegram from Mr Amery to Field Marshal Viscount Wavell, 22 June 1945, L/P&J/8/522: ff 100-2." Ibid., 1149-50.

representative. Congress opposed this, as accepting it would imply representing only caste Hindus. The Wavell Plan proposed a 14-member executive council with six Muslim representatives, a number that went beyond their share in the population. Jinnah further demanded veto power over constitutional proposals, which Congress rejected as excessive.[66]

Sivaraj also opposed granting Muslims such privileges, fearing it would reduce the representation of other minorities. Ambedkar expressed similar concerns in a note to the Viceroy.[67] When the Congress suggested including Scheduled Castes in its list of members, Sivaraj objected, arguing that the Scheduled Castes Federation was the sole representative of the community.[68] However, the Viceroy maintained that it was reasonable for the Congress to have a 'non-Hindu seat,' specifically a Scheduled Caste representative.[69] On 2 July, Sivaraj submitted a list of four SCF members—Ambedkar, Sivaraj, Jogendranath Mandal from Bengal, and Ram Prasad Tamta from UP.[70] However, the Viceroy described Mandal and Tamta as "non-entities" in a telegram to the Secretary of State, suggesting that their influence was limited to regional politics.[71] In contrast, the Congress proposed two Scheduled Caste members, Muniswami Pillai of Madras and Radhanath Das of Bengal.[72]

While forming the executive council, the Viceroy faced conflicting demands from the Congress, Muslim League, and the Scheduled Castes, as noted by his secretary, Evan Jenkins.[73] Ultimately, the decision was to include Ambedkar, despite expected opposition from the Congress, and Muniswami Pillai, described as an 'amiable non-entity.' Ambedkar was to receive the Labour

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[66] "Telegrams from Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Mr Amery, 25 June 1945, L/P&J/8/524: ff 25-6 and L/P&J/8/524: ff 26-7." Ibid., 1151-7.

[67] "Telegram from Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Mr Amery, 7 June 1945, L/PO/10/18: f 183." Ibid., 1043-4.

[68] "Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Mr Amery,1 July 1945, L/PO/10/22." Ibid., 1182-5.

[69] Ibid.

[70] "Telegram from Sir E. Jenkins to Mr Turnbull, 8 July 1945, L/P&J/8/524: f 31." Ibid., 1208-9.

[71] "Telegram from Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Mr Amery Telegram, 8 July 1945, L/P& /8/524: f 32." Ibid., 1210-1.

[72] "Telegram from Maulana Azad to Field Marshal Viscount Wavell, 7 July 1945." Ibid., 1202-5.

[73] "Notes by Sir E. Jenkins and Field Marshal Viscount Wavell, 7 July 1945." Ibid., 1207.

portfolio, and Pillai the Education portfolio.[74] However, the executive council never materialised because Jinnah refused to cooperate without exclusive Muslim League representation.[75] The Simla Conference marked the weakening of the Scheduled Castes Federation as it struggled to maintain its position as the sole representative of Dalits. By the 1945-46 elections, the Congress had emerged as the dominant political force, sidelining the Federation.

Elections that Decided the Federation's Fate as a Representative of the Scheduled Castes

The 1946 elections highlighted a 'crisis of representation for Dalit politics,'[76] as the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) was almost entirely displaced by the Congress in the reserved seats across India. In Bombay, where non-Congress Dalits had secured 12 general seats in 1937, the SCF contested 19 general seats, including 15 reserved seats, but Congress won 14 of the reserved seats, with 1 going to an Independent. The Congress swept all the reserved seats in Madras (30), United Provinces (20), Bihar (15), Assam (7), and Orissa (7). In Bengal, the Congress won 24 out of 30 reserved seats, while Independents took 4, the Communist Party 1, and the SCF only 1. In Punjab, the Congress won 6 of the 8 reserved seats, with the Unionists winning 2. In the Central Provinces and Berar, another SCF stronghold, Congress took 19 out of 20 reserved seats, leaving just 1 for the SCF.[77] Overall, out of 151 reserved seats, the SCF managed to win only two—one each in Bengal and the Central Provinces—marking a significant blow to its political influence.

In its memorandum regarding the 1946 elections, the colonial government assessed the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) as having only local influence in a few areas of Bombay and the Central Provinces. The government noted

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[74] "Telegram from Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to Mr Amery, 9 July 1945, L/P&J/8/524: ff 33-4," in Mansergh, ed., *Transfer of Power*, vol. 5, 1215-7.

[75] "Telegram from Field Marshal Viscount Wavell to all Provincial Governors, 11 July 1945." Ibid., 1227-8.

[76] Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power," 912.

[77] Statement showing the results of the elections to the Indian Legislative Assembly, and to the Legislative Assemblies in Madras, Bombay, Bengal, the United Provinces, Punjab, Bihar, Assam, Northwest Frontier Province, Sind, Central Provinces and Berar and Orissa', IOR: L/P&J/8/483; cited in Bandyopadhyay, *"Transfer of Power,"* 912.

that the SCF did not actively contest 129 out of 151 reserved constituencies, suggesting it lacked a realistic chance of success, even in the primary elections.[78] Out of the 151 seats allocated to Scheduled Castes across the provinces (excluding Sindh and the North-West Frontier Province), primary elections were required only when more than four candidates contested a seat. In the last primary round before the final election, this applied to only 40 out of 151 constituencies, further indicating the SCF's limited reach and influence.[79]

Table 1. Distribution of Seats in Primary Elections Shown Province-Wise

Province	Number of Seats
Madras	10
Bombay	3
Bengal	12
United Provinces	3
Central Provinces	5
Punjab	7

Source: B.R. Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress Represent the Scheduled Castes (Untouchables) of India?," in *BAWS*, ed. Vasant Moon, vol. 10 (New Delhi: Dr Ambedkar Foundation, 2020), 525.

There were no Primary Elections in the Provinces of Bihar and Orissa. The results of the Primary Elections in the 40 constituencies clearly reflect that among the 283 candidates fielded by the Congress (see Table 2), only 46 were nominated by the party. Additionally, out of 168 victorious candidates, merely 38 were from the Congress (see Table 3).

[78] Ibid., 913.

[79] B.R. Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress Represent the Scheduled Castes (Untouchables) of India?," in Moon, ed., *BAWS*, vol. 10, 525.

Table 2. Parties Which Contested Primary Election for Seats Reserved for Scheduled Castes Shown Province-wise

Name of the party which put up candidates to contest primary elections	The number of Candidates put up by each Party in each province						Total number of candidates put up by the party in all the provinces
	Madras	**Bombay**	**Bengal**	**United Provinces**	**Central Provinces**	**Punjab**	
Congress	10	3	13	11	5	4	46
Scheduled Castes Federation	35	6	8	9	12	none	70
Harijan League	none	none	none	1	3	none	4
No-Party Candidates (Independents)	5	9	76	3	8	52	153
Hindu Maha Sabha	none	none	1	1	none	none	2
Communists	6	none	1	none	none	none	7
Radical Democratic Party	none	none	1	none	none	none	1
Total	**56**	**18**	**100**	**25**	**28**	**56**	**283**

Source: Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress", 530.

The purpose of a party entering a Primary Election was to 'eliminate all competing parties from the Final Election by nominating at least four candidates on its ticket'. The ability of a party to nominate four candidates

depends on its confidence in the voters' support for its ticket. The Congress party nominated only one candidate per constituency, indicating a 'lack of confidence that Scheduled Caste voters would support the Congress ticket'.[80] In contrast, the Scheduled Castes Federation had confidently nominated four candidates for each contested seat (see Tables 4 and 5, Columns 3 and 4).

Table 3. Number of Candidates Who Became Successful in Primary Elections in Different Provinces Classified According to Party Affiliations

Name of the Party	**Madras**	**Bombay**	**Bengal**	**U.P.**	**C.P.**	**Punjab**	**Total**
Congress	10	3	12	4	5	4	38
Scheduled Castes Federation	24	5	6	5	11	none	51
Independents	3	4	36	2	3	21	69
Hindu Maha Sabha	none	none	1	1	1	…..	3
Harijan League	none	none	none	none	none	…..	…..
Communists	3	none	1	none	none	…..	4
Radical Democratic Party	none	none	none	none	none	…..	…..
Unionists	none	none	none	none	none	3	3
Total	**40**	**12**	**56**	**12**	**20**	**28**	**168**

Source: Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress", 536.

[80] Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress," 533.

Table 4. Parties Which Contested the Primary Election for Seats Reserved for the Scheduled Castes in Madras Constituency

Constituency in which Primary Election was contested	Total of Candidates who took part in the contest	Parties which fought the election and the number of candidates put up by each			
		Congress	**Scheduled Castes Federation**	**Communists**	**No-Party Candidates/ Independents**
Amlapuram	7	1	4	2	none
Coconada	5	1	4	none	none
Bandar	5	1	1	3	none
Cuddappa	5	1	4	none	none
Penukonda	5	1	4	none	none
Tirnvannamali	6	1	5	none	none
Tindivanam	6	1	5	none	none
Mannergudi	5	1	none	1	3
Pollachi	7	1	4	none	2
Nammakal	5	1	4	none	none
Total	**56**	**10**	**35**	**6**	**5**

Source: Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress", 531.

Based on the votes cast for the Congress, it is indisputable that the party secured only 28 per cent of the total votes in the primary election (see Table 6). 'If there was not the temptation to get oneself elected in the final election with the help of the Hindu votes, the Independents would all be members of the Scheduled Castes Federation. On that assumption, the Scheduled Castes

Federation is the only party that represents the Scheduled Castes, and the 72 per cent voting in favour of the Non-Congress Parties should be set out to its credit'.[81] The outcome of the 1945-46 elections in Bengal held significant implications for the region, as it later served as a benchmark for deciding the partition of Bengal. The Congress party's victory in securing 24 out of 30 seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Bengal was a stark contrast to their earlier claim of only 7 MLAs in the 1937 election. This shift has been described as a "complete reversal" and "effective appropriation" of the Scheduled Caste movement by the Congress.[82]

Table 5. Parties Which Contested the Primary Election for Seats Reserved for the Scheduled Castes in Central Provinces

Constituency in which Primary Election was contested	Total of Candidates who took part in the contest	Parties which fought the election and the number of candidates put up by each			
		Congress	**Scheduled Castes Federation**	**Harijan League**	**No-Party Candidate/ Independents**
Nagpur-cum Sakoli	5	1	2	1	1
Hinganghat	6	1	2	1	2
Bhandara	5	1	3	1	none
Yeotmal	6	1	2	none	3
Chikliali	6	1	3	none	2
Total	**28**	**5**	**12**	**3**	**8**

Source: Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress", 533.

[81] Ibid., 536.
[82] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest, and Identity*, 203.

Table 6. Distribution of Total Votes Polled in Primary Elections Across India and Their Distribution Between Congress and Non-Congress Parties

Total Votes polled throughout India in Primary election	In favour of Congress Parties				In favour of Non-Congress Parties							
	Congress	Harijan League	Total	P.C.	SCF*	Independents	HMS**	Communists	Unionists	RDP***	Total	P.C.
3,59,532	**1,03,449**	**483**	**1,03,932**	**28**	**91,595**	**1,19,273**	**1,212**	**30,863**	**13,521**	**136**	**2,55,600**	**72**

*SCF: Scheduled Castes Federation
**HMS: Hindu Maha Sabha
***RDP: Radical Democratic Party
Source: Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress", 535.

Dwaipayan Sen challenges the idea of integration and argues that the constraints of the Poona Pact hindered the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) from achieving electoral success.[83] Ramnarayan S. Rawat similarly attributes the SCF's defeat in the United Provinces to these limitations.[84] Sen notes that in the primary elections, the Congress contested only 29 out of 121 seats, winning 25. However, 37 Independents also won, but most failed to retain

[83] Dwaipayan Sen, "'No Matter How, Jogendranath Mandal Had to Be Defeated': The Scheduled Castes Federation and the Making of Partition of Bengal, 1945-47," *The Economic and Social History Review* 49, no. 3 (July-September 2012): 327-35.

[84] Ramnarayan S. Rawat, "Partition Politics and Achhut Identity: A Study of the Scheduled Castes Federation and Dalit Politics in UP, 1946–48," in *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, ed. Suvir Kaul (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 111–129; and "Making Claims for Power: A New Agenda in Dalit Politics of Uttar Pradesh, 1946–48," in *The Past of the Outcaste: Readings in Dalit History*, eds. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Yagati Chinna Rao (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2017), 252–272.

their seats in the general elections. He uses examples from Jessore and Faridpur to illustrate his argument. In Jessore, a Federation candidate who came second in the primary round failed to win either of the two reserved seats in the general election. In Faridpur, two Federation candidates who ranked second and third in the primary elections also lost in the general election. Sen questions whether the 24 out of 25 Congress victories in the general elections genuinely reflected Dalit political preferences.[85] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay attributes the SCF's defeat to a lack of organisation, criticising its failure to contest 129 out of 151 reserved seats.[86]

The Cabinet Mission Betrayal

On 23 March 1946, the Cabinet Mission arrived in Karachi, including Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Stafford Cripps, and A.V. Alexander. Their goal was to collaborate with Lord Wavell and Indian leaders for facilitating the transfer of power.[87] The Mission made it clear that recognition of leadership would be based on the 1946 election results, diminishing the credibility of the SCF and Ambedkar as Scheduled Caste representatives. In a press conference on 25 March, Pethick-Lawrence asserted that India's right to self-determination was settled, and its priority was to develop new institutions smoothly and efficiently.[88] Ambedkar, representing the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF), submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet Mission demanding separate electorates, adequate representation in legislatures and public services, funds for education, and new settlements for Scheduled Castes.[89] On 16 May 1946, the Cabinet Mission released its State Papers, proposing a union of India with three provincial groups, an interim government, and a Constituent Assembly

[85] Sen, "'No Matter How, Jogendranath Mandal Had to Be Defeated,'" 328. Sen challenges the Congress' dominance over the Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Bengal by highlighting the defection of four Congress-backed MLAs to the Scheduled Castes Federation. These individuals, including Dwarkanath Baruri, Haran Chandra Burman, Bholanath Biswas, and Gayanath Biswas, had initially been assured by the Congress of protecting the interests of their community but ultimately lost faith in the party's ability to do so.

[86] Bandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power," 913.

[87] "Introduction," in Mansergh, ed., *Transfer of Power*, vol. 7, ix.

[88] Ibid.

[89] B.R. Ambedkar, Moon ed., *BAWS*, vol. 17, part 2, 172-81.

elected on a communal basis.[90] However, these plans ignored the demands outlined by Ambedkar. The Scheduled Castes were excluded from the final discussions at Simla, indicating that the British accepted the Congress' and Gandhi's view of them as part of the Hindu community, further marginalising their voices in the movement for independence.[91]

Ambedkar's demands to the Cabinet Mission were not new or unexpected, as they had been consistently raised since 1942.[92] These demands were grounded in the commitments made by previous Viceroys who had acknowledged the Scheduled Castes as a distinct group deserving representation. For example, on 8 August 1940, Linlithgow affirmed that the British Government valued the views of minorities in any constitutional plan and would not support transferring power to a government that significant sections of India's population rejected. This position assured minorities like the Scheduled Castes that their interests would be considered, making Ambedkar's demands valid and reasonable.[93] The Scheduled Castes were disappointed to be categorised with Hindus under the Cabinet Mission's proposals.[94] In a parliamentary debate on 18 July 1946, Cripps, Alexander, and Pethick-Lawrence defended this decision. They argued that Congress' success in the reserved seats showed that the Scheduled Castes trusted the party to represent them. Additionally,

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[90] For the Constituent Assembly's composition, the Cabinet Mission Plan classified members of the provincial legislatures into three distinct groups: (1) Muslims, (2) Sikhs, and (3) General. Each group was allocated a specific number of seats and was to elect its own representatives through a separate electorate system. This meant that Muslim members of provincial legislatures would vote for Muslim representatives, Sikhs for Sikh representatives, and all others—categorised under 'General'—would elect their representatives. The 'General' group encompassed Hindus, Scheduled Castes, Indian Christians, and Anglo-Indians. See "Cabinet Mission Plan (Cabinet Mission, 1946)- Constitution of India," Constitution of India, accessed June 12, 2024, https://www.constitutionofindia.net/historical-constitution/cabinet-mission-plan-cabinet-mission-1946/.

[91] B.R. Ambedkar, "Reactions to the British Cabinet Plan: Dr. Ambedkar's Protest to Churchill," in Moon ed., *BAWS*, vol. 17, part 2, 223.

[92] It was also mentioned at the Simla Conference in 1945. See B.R. Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables," in Moon ed., *BAWS*, vol. 9, Appendix XI, 346-47.

[93] An important speech in which the British formally offered Dominion Status to India. *Speeches by The Marquess of Linlithgow*, vol. 2, November 1938- October 1943 (New Delhi: Government of India, 1944), 233-40.

[94] Ambedkar, "Does the Indian National Congress," 523.

they claimed that the Advisory Committee on minorities would allow the Scheduled Castes to participate in shaping their safeguards. These arguments aimed to justify grouping the Scheduled Castes with Hindus.[95]

The Cabinet Mission claimed Ambedkar's influence was limited to the Bombay Presidency and Central Provinces, but this was inaccurate. The Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) had a presence beyond these regions and achieved notable success. The Mission overlooked Ambedkar's victory in the Constituent Assembly elections from the Bengal Provincial Legislative Assembly, where he secured seven first-preference votes, surpassing Sarat Chandra Bose of the Congress. Considering that most of the Scheduled Caste members in Bengal were elected on a Congress ticket and one SCF member was absent due to illness, Ambedkar's win indicates that at least six Congress-affiliated members defied their party to support him.[96] This showed his influence beyond his perceived strongholds, contradicting the Cabinet Mission's assessment.

Ambedkar rejected the second argument by Cripps, Alexander, and Pethick-Lawrence as 'worse than useless'. He criticised the Advisory Committee for lacking clear powers and relying on simple majority decisions. Since the Committee mirrored the Constituent Assembly, where Scheduled Castes' representatives were Congress members bound by its mandate, Ambedkar believed they could not genuinely represent Scheduled Caste interests.[97] Ambedkar also rejected the 1946 election results as a legitimate measure of the Congress representing the Scheduled Castes, arguing that the outcome was not a reliable indicator. He noted that parties cooperating with the British had lost the trust of the Indian masses, which affected their electoral performance. Additionally, the Indian National Army (INA) trials, coinciding with the elections, worked in Congress' favour. Ambedkar believed that 'If the INA had not been staged at the time of the election, the Congress would have lost completely'.[98]

[95] Ibid., 523-24.
[96] Ibid., 527.
[97] Ibid., 524.
[98] Ibid., 524-5.

Moreover, Ambedkar criticised the use of the joint electorate system for Scheduled Castes' seats, where Hindus, the numerical majority, could vote. This allowed the Congress to secure Scheduled Caste seats primarily through Hindu votes instead of Dalit support, making the claim of genuine representation questionable. He argued that the election results could not accurately reflect the political preferences of the Scheduled Castes.[99] Ambedkar emphasised that the true measure of whether the Congress genuinely represented the Scheduled Castes lay in the results of the primary elections, conducted through a separate electorate without Hindu voters. He believed these results reflected the genuine sentiments of the Scheduled Castes. Of the 151 reserved seats for Scheduled Castes in the Provincial Legislatures—allocated across provinces except Sindh and the North-West Frontier Province—primary elections were required only when more than four candidates contested a seat. In the most recent elections, this applied to 40 out of 151 constituencies.[100]

Ambedkar wrote a detailed letter to the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, expressing his concerns about the elections and the flaws of the Poona Pact.[101] However, Attlee dismissed his claims, acknowledging the pact's potential injustices but not seeing sufficient reasons to change it. He argued that supporting Ambedkar's stance could be seen as interference with the Constituent Assembly and risk resentment.[102] Attlee's response was unexpected, as it marked a withdrawal of British support for Dalits against the Congress and mirrored Gandhi's view of Ambedkar as a regional leader. Despite this setback, Ambedkar continued to fight for Dalit rights through satyagrahas, determined to secure representation in the new constitutional framework. The Cabinet Mission marked a complete shift in British patronage, abandoning the Scheduled Castes Federation they once recognised as distinct from caste Hindus. During their visit, the Mission consulted with leaders from the 'Nationalist Scheduled Castes'[103], including Jagjivan Ram, indicating that the British no longer saw Ambedkar as the sole representative of the Dalit community, a significant departure from the Cripps Mission's stance.

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[99] Ibid., 525.

[100] Ibid., 525-27.

[101] B.R. Ambedkar, Moon ed., *BAWS*, vol. 17 part II, 250.

[102] Ibid.

[103] "Introduction," in Mansergh, ed., *Transfer of Power*, vol. 7, x.

Conclusion

Ambedkar strongly condemned the Cabinet Mission's proposals, calling them a "shameful betrayal" of the sixty million untouchables and warning that excluding them from the Constituent Assembly and the Advisory Committee left them vulnerable. In a letter to Churchill, he expressed fears of a bleak future for the Scheduled Castes, to which Churchill assured him that the Conservative Party would work to protect their interests. However, these promises proved empty, as the Cabinet Mission's plan largely disregarded the Scheduled Castes as a distinct political entity.[104]

Even when Ambedkar insisted that separate electorates were essential for genuine representation, Pethick-Lawrence argued that once independence was achieved, Indian politics would shift to economic issues, suggesting that the Scheduled Castes would benefit more by aligning with left-wing movements than relying on a departing British government.[105] This reasoning seemed to mask the British retreat towards Gandhi's view, sidelining Ambedkar's demands and leaving the Scheduled Castes without effective safeguards. In a debate on 6 March 1947 in London, Attlee addressed Britain's responsibilities toward minorities, including the Scheduled Castes. He argued that the British Raj lacked the power, not the will, to uplift the untouchables, and claimed that their position was a part of the Hindu social system that Britain largely accepted. Attlee questioned why Britain was now expected to resolve these issues before leaving India, suggesting that any genuine commitment should have been fulfilled long ago. He defended the Cabinet Mission's approach as a "mission of fulfilment" rather than a betrayal.[106]

This statement reflected the British retreat from their earlier support for Ambedkar and the Scheduled Castes Federation. Despite initially backing the McDonald Award against Gandhi's opposition, the British ultimately abandoned Ambedkar to avoid complicating the transfer of power. The rapid

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[104] B. R. Ambedkar, "Reactions to the British Cabinet Plan: Dr. Ambedkar's Protest to Churchill," in Moon ed., *BAWS*, vol. 17, part 2, 223.

[105] B. R. Ambedkar, "A Note on the Meeting Between Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Field Marshal Viscount Wavell." Ibid., 193.

[106] Alan Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1994), 29.

shift from recognising the Scheduled Castes as a distinct political group to sidelining them marked a significant change in British policy within a decade. Ambedkar was a genuine representative of the Dalit community, advocating for their political, social, and economic safeguards to secure their future. Unlike the limited goals of temple entry or punishing caste Hindus, he prioritised education and economic empowerment for the Scheduled Castes. However, a significant limitation in his approach was his reliance on the British. While the Scheduled Castes Federation brought some centralisation to Dalit politics, its influence remained limited. If Ambedkar had built coalitions with influential leaders beyond Gandhi from the start, the Federation might have been seen as a crucial participant in the transfer of power.

Contrary to accusations of separatism, Ambedkar did not oppose India's independence; his concern was the status of Dalits in a free India. His fight was not for political power or personal gain but for securing rights that would prevent future generations from facing the discrimination he endured. The vision he planted in the Indian Constitution reflected his commitment to Dalit upliftment. Ambedkar's leadership continues to inspire Dalit struggles for dignity, identity, and structural change in Indian society.

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Sculpting the Symbols: Reading the meanings of sculptures at the Sesharayar Mandapa in Srirangam Temple

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This paper examines the figural sculptures of the Sesharayar Mandapa in the Srirangam Temple, focusing on their historical, cultural, and symbolic meanings. Highlighting cavalry, tiger-hunting, and mythological scenes, the study interprets these images as visual assertions of Vijayanagara imperial power and legitimacy. It contextualises the mandapa as both an artistic achievement and a political statement, reflecting claims over Chola legacy, military prowess, and temple restoration. Through an iconological reading of the composite columns, the paper reveals how sculpture functioned as a medium to convey sovereignty, religious guardianship, and socio-political aspirations within early modern South Indian temple architecture.

Keywords: Sesharayar Mandapa, Vijayanagara Empire, iconography, tiger-hunting imagery, Vaishnavism.

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, the historiography of Indian art has undergone several significant trends and phases. In its initial phase, colonial archaeologists and historians recorded, catalogued, and attempted to establish a chronology for the monuments found across the subcontinent.[1] The second major development was led by native Indologists, who were inspired by earlier discoveries and driven by emerging nationalist concerns. These scholars not only systematised the cataloguing of monuments but also identified the sculptures within them by using myths from religious texts. This approach was further enriched by a trend that connected art with philosophy, symbolism, and social function.[2] While some recent studies have focused purely on the formal aspects of Indian art, a notable development has been the

[1] R. Champakalakshmi, *Religion, Tradition, and Ideology: Pre- Colonial South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 463.

[2] Ibid., 464.

rise of iconology—a method that interprets an image as a text with multiple layers of meaning. These include literal representations, symbolic meanings decoded with the help of canonical texts, and intrinsic meanings that can only be understood through the knowledge of specific cultural codes associated with the artefact. Interpreting this intrinsic meaning reveals the deeper purpose and significance of an artwork.[3]

The Sri Ranganathaswami Temple, a major centre of South Indian Vaishnavism, is dedicated to Vishnu reclining on the coils of the serpent *Adisesha*. Located in the ethereal setting of Srirangam Island, surrounded by the rivers Kaveri and Kollidam, it is considered one of Asia's largest living religious complexes and features numerous remarkable architectural structures. Among them is the Sesharayar Mandapa, renowned for its colossal sculptures of cavalry figures emerging from intricately carved figural composite columns. This paper aims to explore the intrinsic meaning of these sculptures by situating and interpreting them within their historical and cultural context. To achieve this, the paper is divided into two main parts. The first part offers a brief history of the Srirangam Temple, discusses the significance of the Sesharayar Mandapa, and surveys the dynamic sculptures that appear to leap from its pillars. The second part considers the Sesharayar Mandapa as a visual archive, contextualising selected sculptures within the socio-cultural and political conditions of their time and analysing their symbolic meanings.

I

Brief history of the Srirangam Temple

Kōvil Oḻugu, the chronicle of the Srirangam Temple (Figure 1) compiled between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, informs us that the temple was founded by an early Chola king, roughly around the first century CE. References to Srirangam Island and the Ranganatha Temple can also be traced in the Sangam literary corpus. An *akam* ode from Sangam literature compares the face of a young woman, saddened by separation from her lover, "to the sandy and thickly wooded riverbank in Arangam, with quenched hearths

[3] Ibid., 465.

strewn hither and thither, after the celebration of the *Panguni* festival."[4] The *Silappatikāram*, a fourth-century Tamil Jain epic authored by Ilanko Adikal, mentions the god of Srirangam as "reposing with Lakṣmī on His breast on the couch of the thousand-hooded serpent."[5] The protagonists of the epic, Kannagi and Kovalan, on their way to Madurai, meet a Brahmin pilgrim hailing from the western hills who is on his way to worship the reclining Vishnu in Srirangam. It is therefore evident that Srirangam had become a significant Vaishnavite centre by Ilanko Adikal's time and gained even greater prominence during the *bhakti* movement. Eleven of the twelve *Azhwars*[6] composed hymns praising Vishnu enshrined in Srirangam. Saints such as Andal, Thirumangai Azhwar, and Thiruppaan Azhwar were closely associated with the temple.[7] Following them, Vaishnava acharyas like Nathamuni and Alavandar not only resided in Srirangam but also played an active role in temple administration. Ramanuja, another prominent figure in the Sri Vaishnavism tradition and the founder of the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* (qualified non-dualism) philosophy, made the Srirangam Temple his headquarters.[8] He significantly reorganised the temple administration and was instrumental in including non-Brahmin communities in the worship of Ranganatha.

The earliest inscriptions carved into the stone surfaces of the walls and pillars of the Srirangam Temple date to the Chola dynasty of the tenth century CE. Although substantial donations of land and other gifts were made to the Ranganatha Temple by the Chola kings—and Rajamahendra Chola is credited with constructing the temple's second *prakara* (enclosure wall)—Vaishnavite devotees and saints faced persecution during the reign of Krimikanda Chola. A twelfth-century text titled *Kuloṭṭuṅka Cōḷan Ula* narrates how the image of Vishnu was removed from the Chidambaram Temple and cast into the ocean

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[4] V. N. Hari Rao, *The Srirangam Temple: Art and Architecture* (Tirupati:Sri Venkateswara University, 1967), 2.

[5] Hari Rao, *Srirangam Temple*, 2.

[6] The *Azhwars* are the Vaishnavite poet saints who played an important role in the *bhakti* movement (6th–9th century CE). They visited many temples and other sacred sites singing the hymns they composed in the praise of the deities residing in those temples. Works of the twelve *Azhwars* were compiled at the end of the ninth century by Nathamuni, who was a priest at Srirangam Temple.

[7] Badri Seshadri, "A History of Srirangam," *THT's Site Seminar*, April 5, 2013, accessed May 17, 2021. https://thtsiteseminars.wordpress.com/2013/04/05/pre-visit-talk/.

[8] Hari Rao, *The Srirangam Temple*, 3.

by this Chola ruler. To escape Krimikanda's tyranny, Ramanuja was forced to leave Srirangam and seek refuge in the Mysore region, then under Hoysala rule.[9] The Hoysala kings later intervened in the political affairs of the Tamil region during a time of intense conflict between the Cholas and the Pandyas. They built the Venugopala shrine in the fourth *prakara*, which remains the most beautiful and ornate sub-shrine in Srirangam, and continued to be generous patrons of the temple.

Figure 1: An aerial view of Srirangam Temple's east tower, along with other towers and the city.
Source: Photograph by Ajay Goyal.[10]

The most significant benefactor of Srirangam, however, was Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I, who donated gold, precious stones, and other valuable gifts to the temple.[11] His successors in the Pandya dynasty continued this legacy, contributing further wealth to Srirangam. Over time, this vast accumulation of wealth was depleted during the military expeditions of Malik Kafur and Ulugh Khan in the fourteenth century. With the establishment of the

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ajay Goyal, *The Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam, photograph,* October 30, 2011, accessed June 7, 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Srirangamlong_view.jpg.

[11] Ibid., 4.

independent Sultanate of Madurai, the Srirangam Temple ceased to function as a Vaishnavite centre and was repurposed as a military base by the new rulers. Nevertheless, temple worship and activities were soon restored following the intervention of the Vijayanagara army, led by Kumara Kampana, which also initiated significant renovations and extensions to the temple complex.[12]

The 'Horse Court' of Srirangam

"Religious foundations in the growing cities and popular pilgrimage sites of the Tamil country were repeatedly renovated and expanded throughout the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods. Temples were transformed into vast complexes, featuring multiple sanctuaries, sub-shrines, mandapas, corridors, courtyards, tanks, and gopuras."[13] The Srirangam Temple, which originally consisted of a small shrine housing the image of Ranganatha resting on the serpent *Adisesha*, evolved into an enormous complex with seven *prakaras*, massive enclosures, fifty subsidiary shrines, nine sacred pools, thirty-nine pavilions, and seventeen major gopuras. While many of these architectural elements were added during the Vijayanagara–Nayaka period, the open and detached mandapas are often considered their most remarkable contribution. "Mandapas progress from the hundred-columned halls to, literally, thousand-columned halls. Multiple aisles define axial corridors and wrap around spaces intended to accommodate a large number of worshippers."[14] At times, platforms are raised at the ends of aisles and corridors within these mandapas for the ceremonial display of religious images. There are five such mandapas in the Srirangam Temple: The Thousand-Pillared Mandapa, Sesharayar Mandapa, Garuda Mandapa, Kili Mandapa, and Ranga Vilasa Mandapa. Though all of these contain monolithic pillars and sculptures ranging from courtly portraits to wild and mythical creatures, art historians regard the

[12] Hari Rao, *The Srirangam Temple*, 5.

[13] George Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern Indian Vijayanagara and the Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73.

[14] Ibid., 76.

Sesharayar Mandapa as the most artistically accomplished pillared hall in the Srirangam Temple.[15]

Figure 2: *Sesharayar Mandapa*
Source: Photograph by the author.

The Sesharayar Mandapa lies on the eastern side of the fourth enclosure and to the southwest of the *Vellai Gopuram* or the white tower. It measures 100 feet by 80 feet 10 inches and has eight rows of twelve pillars each. Most of these pillars include pilasters and feature sculptures on their rectangular bases and blocks. The western row of the mandapa contains relief sculptures of the *Dashavatara*, arranged in sequence from *Matsya* to *Kalki*. In the central portion of the Sesharayar Mandapa, there are life-sized portrait sculptures of a royal family accompanied by attendants, all shown in rigidly frontal poses and standing in *anjali mudra* – the gesture of greeting and devotion. Other reliefs carved on the pillars depict dancing women, musicians, *mithunas*, *Garuda*, a giraffe, the three-faced Brahma, and Arjuna in penance. On the ceiling, emblems of Sri Vaishnava flanked by armed fishes are also carved. However, these images alone do not make the Sesharayar Mandapa the most artistically significant hall in the Srirangam Temple, as their finish is relatively rough and

[15] A. Sivasamy, "Architectural Significance of Srirangam Sri Ranganatha Swami Temple: Gleened from Inscriptions," *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, 3, no.1* (2018): 33.

similar examples can be found elsewhere in the complex. What truly distinguishes this mandapa is the northernmost row of composite columns. Each pillar, approximately 5.7 meters tall, is covered with intricate reliefs. These include various forms of Narasimha, Lakshmi seated on a lotus, Rati and Manmatha riding birds, Venugopala with cows, and Vishnu in three different postures. Mythological scenes such as *Vaali vadha*, Hanuman carrying the *Sanjeevani* Mountain (Figure 3), the divine marriage of Ranganatha and Nachiyar, Vibhishana holding the vimana[16] of Srirangam, and the churning of the ocean of milk are also depicted.

Figure 3: *Ramayana panel in Sesharayar Mandapa*
Source: Photograph by the author.

In addition to these divine representations, the pillars feature vibrant secular imagery—*mithuna* couples, wrestlers, hunters, warriors on horseback, and elephants. While all the relief sculptures are detailed and expressive, the colossal rearing horses with riders brandishing swords or spears, emerging dramatically from the columns, immediately draw attention. These striking figural composite columns are what make the Sesharayar Mandapa a visually and architecturally magnificent structure. Early art historians such as James

[16] In South Indian temple architecture, the vimana is the main tower structure above the garbhagriha (inner sanctum). It's a prominent feature of Dravidian style temples and is a stepped, pyramidal tower with multiple storeys.

Fergusson and E. B. Havell were so impressed by this feature that they referred to the mandapa as the "horse court."[17]

Figure 4: *Horses of the Horse Court*
Source: Photograph by the author.

Survey of the emerging sculptures

Life-sized and naturalistic horses, richly bridled for war, emerge from eight composite columns in the northernmost row of the Sesharayar Mandapa (Figure 4). Each is depicted in a dynamic pose, rearing up on its hind legs as if preparing to charge. Cavalrymen ride these horses, armed with swords, long spears, and daggers, as though already engaged in battle. Their feet are firmly planted in the stirrups, which provide stability and leverage. Five of the eight horses are shown trampling the heads of ferocious, sharp-toothed tigers leaping toward them. Beneath each horse stand three additional soldiers, armed with *kataras*—a type of push dagger—assisting in the attack. To avoid being crushed under the horses' hooves, some of the soldiers raise their shields to protect their heads. The sharp blades of their *kataras* pierce the thick hides of the tigers, emerging from the opposite side. On one pillar, a warrior on

[17] Hari Rao, *The Srirangam Temple,* 70.

horseback is shown violently thrusting a spear into a tiger's mouth, the weapon visibly tearing through its skin. Despite their wounds, the tigers are not portrayed as defeated—they raise their claws in defiance, attempting to maul their attackers. In one of the columns, two dogs join the battle, assisting the soldiers in subduing the beast. On the easternmost pillar of the row, a sensuous female figure is sculpted standing beneath the horse. However, her arms and the musical instrument she once held have been partially destroyed, along with the horse's front legs and the tiger beneath it—only the paw of the beast now remains. Despite the damage, a quiver of arrows is still visible on the horse's side—a detail not present on the other horses of this mandapa.

Figure 5: *Hunting down the tiger*
Source: Photograph by the author.

Three of the figural composite columns in this row do not depict the tiger-hunting scene. For instance, the third pillar from the west features a *yali*, "an ithyphallic beast with lion-like body, mane, claws, and curling tail. The head has protruding horns, bulging eyes, and pointed teeth; a long elephant-like snout sometimes hangs down in a long curl."[18] The trunk of the *yali* is intertwined with that of a small elephant sculpted below. A rearing horse with a rider tramples the *yali's* head, just as the other horses crush the tigers in adjacent columns. Similarly, a soldier is shown holding a shield above his head

[18] Michell, *Architecture and art of Southern Indian,* 189.

for protection, with a dagger tucked into his belt. Through these images, the sculptor skillfully asserts the dominance of the cavalry over man, elephant, and mythical beast alike. The sixth pillar from the west contains another intriguing scene beneath the horse. A large man wielding a sword is shown running away with a smaller woman hoisted onto his shoulders (Figure 6). Art historians interpret this as a depiction of a *Kuravan*—a tribal figure known for selling aphrodisiacs and medicinal herbs—abducting a princess. The rearing horse behind them suggests that cavalrymen are in pursuit. The *Kuravan* has been wounded in the thigh by a warrior dressed in a buttoned garment and hat, with a gun slung across his back. He is accompanied by a smaller figure in similar attire; both are identified as Portuguese soldiers. Behind them, a seated monkey is sculpted, seemingly observing the entire scene with curiosity. Another composite column, located immediately next to the one featuring the Portuguese, also lacks a tiger-hunting scene. Three soldiers stand beneath the rearing horse, two of them holding shields above their heads. Compared to the other columns, the emerging sculptures are comparatively fewer in this one.

Figure 6: *Portuguese soldiers attacking Kuravan*
Source: Photograph by the author.

II

Studying the meanings

Having briefly described the subjects sculpted on the figural composite columns of the Sesharayar Mandapa, this section of the paper will explore the symbolic meanings embedded in some of these sculptures. Unlike depictions of divine or supernatural beings, or narrative panels illustrating episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, or *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the figures emerging from these columns do not require the viewer to be familiar with religious myths or epics. Although they primarily portray cavalry and tiger-hunting scenes, these sculptures reflect the values, aspirations, and ideology of the Vijayanagara Empire. This second layer of meaning can be discerned by situating the sculptures within the historical and cultural context of their production.

Horses as the symbol of sovereignty

The image of a rearing horse with a rider armed with a sword or spear emerging from a pillar is not unique to the Sesharayar Mandapa at the Srirangam Temple. For instance, the Kalyana Mandapa of the Varadaraja Perumal Temple at Kanchipuram features imaginative and striking variations of cavalry composite columns, where "a different armed and dressed rider appears on each side. On one side, the rider waves a sword; on the other, a spear; one wears tight-fitted striped trousers, the other a flaring tunic."[19] Similar columns appear alongside *yali* composite columns at several other sites, including the Jalakantesvara Temple in Vellore, the Margasahayesvara Temple in Vrinjipuram, and the Bhaktavatsala Temple in Tirukkalukundram.[20] As the figural composite column itself is an innovation attributed to Vijayanagara sculptors, these horseman figures were likely created during the Vijayanagara–Nayaka period. Scenes of cavalrymen in battle were also common in relief panels and mural paintings from the same era.[21] Interestingly, scholar Crispin Branfoot observes that the iconography of

[19] Crispin Branfoot, "'Expanding Form': The Architectural Sculpture of the South Indian Temple, ca. 1500-1700," *Artibus Asiae,* 62, no.2 (2002): 205.

[20] Branfoot, "Expanding Form," 206.

[21] Sa. Balusami, *nayakkar kaalak kalaik kooTpaaTukal* (Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu Publications, 2017), 330.

a rearing horse with an armed rider is a distinctly sixteenth-century development with no clear precedent. Although temples such as the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram and the Sarangapani Temple at Kumbakonam feature prominent sculptures of chariot horses from the early medieval period, equestrian imagery was otherwise uncommon in Tamil temple art of earlier centuries.

This does not imply that horses were unknown or insignificant in Tamil society before the Vijayanagara Empire. Although there is no direct evidence of horse breeding in ancient Tamilakam, Tamil chieftains and kings imported horses from northern India and abroad. Inscriptions from Sri Lanka suggest that Tamil rulers acquired horses from northwestern India as early as the second century BCE. The *Paṭṭiṉappālai*, a work of Sangam literature, also references the trade in horses from distant lands. From at least the sixth century CE, Persian horses began to be imported by the Tamils.[22] This overseas horse trade gained prominence during the tenth and eleventh centuries, when cavalry units became part of the Chola military.[23]

By the thirteenth century, foreign accounts—such as that of Marco Polo—highlighted the scale of this trade. Marco Polo observed that a Pandya king "wants to buy more than 2,000 horses every year, and so do his four brothers who are kings likewise."[24] Despite purchasing horses in large numbers, early medieval Tamil kings failed to effectively utilize them in warfare. Foreign travellers noted that fewer than a hundred of the imported horses typically survived by the end of each year. Even skilled workers appointed to care for the animals lacked proper expertise. Inadequate feeding and rough handling caused even the strongest and most agile horses to become weak, sluggish, and ineffective within a short time.[25] It can thus be argued that, although Tamil kings acquired horses in substantial numbers, very few remained fit for military use. Consequently, pre-Vijayanagara rulers may not have viewed

[22] Nazer Aziz Anjum, "Horse Trade in Medieval South India," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress,* 73 (2012), 295.

[23] S.K. Shukla, "Horse Trade in Medieval South India Its Political and Economic Implications," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress,* 42 (1981), 301.

[24] Anjum, "Horse Trade", 297.

[25] Ibid.

horses as potent symbols of sovereignty—worthy of being immortalized in temple sculpture.

Figure 7: A Panel in the Hazara Rama Temple at Hampi depicting Horse trade.
Source: Photograph by Vikram Nanjappa.[26]

However, the conditions faced by the Vijayanagara rulers were markedly different from those of their predecessors. "Immediately after or almost simultaneously with the establishment of the Vijayanagara state, there emerged to the north of the Raichur Doab the Bahmani state, which became independent of the Delhi Sultanate in 1347."[27] The Deccan sultans employed the finest breeds of Arabian horses in their armies and were popularly known as *ashvapati*, or 'lord of horses.' From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, the Vijayanagara Empire and the Deccan Sultanates were engaged in frequent and intense warfare. In addition to external threats, the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed persistent conflicts between the central

[26] Vikram Nanjappa, in Snigdha Sharma's "*A Day in The Life of Krishnadeva Raya," Evolve Back, January 21, 2019,* accessed on June 7, 2021, https://www.evolveback.com/hampi/krishnadeva-raya/.

[27] Noboru Karashima ed., *A Concise History of South India Issues and Interpretations* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 188.

authority of Vijayanagara and its regional subordinates and eventual rivals—the Nayakas.[28] As a result, the Vijayanagara kings had to radically transform their military strategy, placing significant emphasis on the development of a powerful cavalry. This transformation necessitated the importation of horses on an unprecedented scale (Figure 7). By the mid-fourteenth century, *kudiraichetti's*—the traditional horse traders—had disappeared, and Arab merchants began to monopolize the horse trade. These merchants not only raised prices but also imposed harsh and unreasonable terms on buyers.[29] The arrival of the Portuguese on the Indian subcontinent in the early sixteenth century disrupted the Arab monopoly over the horse trade. With their increasing dependence on the Portuguese for the supply of horses, the Vijayanagara rulers developed close diplomatic and military ties with them. The two powers even allied in battles against the Bahmani Sultanate.[30] The depiction of Portuguese soldiers alongside native warriors in the sculptural program of the Sesharayar Mandapa reflects this military collaboration. In 1547, the Vijayanagara state secured an agreement granting it exclusive rights to procure horses from the Portuguese.[31]

It is therefore evident that cavalry had become an essential component of the Vijayanagara army and a powerful symbol of royal sovereignty. The depiction of rearing horses with armed riders in the sculpted columns of several temples—including at Srirangam—serves as a visual proclamation of the might and military superiority of the Vijayanagara Empire.

Killing tigers and annexing *Cholamandalam*

Five of the eight figural composite columns at the Sesharayar Mandapa depict dramatic tiger-hunting scenes. Ferocious tigers, shown rearing on their hind legs, are stabbed in the stomach or mouth—either by mounted cavalrymen or by warriors positioned beneath the horses. The sharp edges of swords and spears pierce the tigers' thick hides and emerge from the opposite side. These are not the only representations of tiger hunting in the mandapa. The colossal figures emerging from the pillars stand on small platforms attached to the

[28] Branfoot, "'Expanding Form'," 205.
[29] Shukla, "Horse Trade in Medieval South," 312.
[30] Anjum, "Horse Trade," 300.
[31] Ibid.

columns, around which additional relief panels are carved. Two of these panels also depict tiger-hunting scenes (Figure 8). The panel on the second pillar from the east shows an elephant rider attacking a tiger; while the elephant's trunk impales the tiger, the soldier seated above stabs it in the head. The fifth and eighth pillars contain panels illustrating fierce combat between a soldier and a tiger.

Figure 8: *Panel that depicts tiger hunting*
Source: Photography by the author.

Throughout history, dominant groups have appropriated hunting as a powerful cultural code to legitimize their authority.[32] From early times, hunting functioned as a key medium for showcasing royal bravery and training young warriors in Indian societies. It was also employed as a means of policing and subjugating rebellious or troublesome territories, with royal hunting parties "viciously decimating wildlife populations in a fearsome display of military power in these regions."[33] Kings of the Vijayanagara Empire were deeply engaged in hunting, and their exploits were commemorated through relief sculptures in various temples. The Hazara Rama Temple at Hampi, for instance, features panels depicting hunting scenes in which figures on horseback or on foot attack ferocious tigers or herds of

[32] Vijaya Ramadas Mandala, *Shooting a Tiger Big-Game Hunting and Conservation in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 39.

[33] Ibid., 40.

deer with bows and arrows, often accompanied by hunting dogs and drumbeaters.[34] Art historian Balusamy notes that the Chinnappa Nayaka pond contains a detailed visual narration of a wild boar hunt.[35] In this context, the tiger-hunting images at the Sesharayar Mandapa can be interpreted as representations of real-life hunting adventures undertaken by Vijayanagara nobles and soldiers.

Nevertheless, in Indian culture, animals are often imbued with symbolic meanings, and their visual representations frequently reflect these associations. For example, *yali* sculptures found on temple pillars symbolize royal authority and the protective power of Hindu kings, while the elephant depicted beneath them is often interpreted as a symbol of Buddhism. The recurring motif of the *yali*-elephant juxtaposition in medieval iconography has thus been read as a visual allegory of the subjugation of Buddhism to Hindu religious dominance.[36] Similarly, the tiger functions as a metaphor for magnificence, power, fierceness, bravery, and valour. It is also closely associated with several Hindu deities, including Durga, Ayyappa, and Shiva. The tiger's divine associations can be traced as far back as the Indus Valley Civilization, where a Harappan seal depicts a female deity grappling with two tigers.[37] More significantly, the tiger served as the royal emblem of the medieval Chola dynasty and appeared prominently on their coins, seals, and banners.

The Chola dynasty was established in the fertile Kaveri delta around the mid-ninth century by Vijayalaya Chola. However, it was under Raja Raja I and his successors that the Cholas rose to become a dominant cultural, economic, and military power. Raja Raja I is renowned for commissioning the grand Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur and for expanding the empire by annexing large parts of the Tamil country and northern Sri Lanka. His son and successor, Rajendra I, further extended Chola influence by conquering the entire island

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[34] Priya Thakur, "Interdependence of Animal and Men in the 14th Century Vijayanagara Empire as Represented through Sculptural Reliefs," *Bhatter College Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies,* 3 (2013), 15.

[35] Balusami, *nayakkar kaalak,* 179.

[36] Laxshmi Rose Greaves and Adam Hardy, *Bridging Heaven and Earth: Art and Architecture in South Asia, 3rd Century BCE-21st Century CE* (New Delhi: Dev Publishers, 2020), 234.

[37] Uma Athale, "Tigers in Indian Mythology," *Jeevoka,* October 2, 2019, https://jeevoka.com/tigers-in-indian-mythology/s (June 3, 2021).

of Sri Lanka, launching a naval expedition to the Malacca Straits, and leading military campaigns along the eastern coast of India, ultimately defeating the Palas of Bengal.[38] Despite their formidable strength, the Chola Empire began to decline in the early thirteenth century. By this time, even the heartland of the empire—*Cholamandalam*—had slipped from Chola control, signalling the collapse of one of South India's most powerful dynasties.[39]

After the fall of the Chola Empire in the 13th century, a political vacuum emerged in the Tamil country. Neither the Pandyas nor any other dynasties of the region were able to attain the prominence once held by the Cholas. It was during this period of fragmentation that the Vijayanagara rulers from the Deccan overthrew the short-lived Madurai Sultanate and brought vast portions of Tamil Nadu under their direct control—including the former Chola capital of Thanjavur and other parts of *Cholamandalam*. Although the Vijayanagara Empire never confronted the Cholas in battle, the Vijayanagara kings were fully aware that, by annexing *Cholamandalam* and other Tamil regions, they were inheriting the legacy of the mighty Cholas. If the tiger was the royal emblem of the Cholas, then the warhorse and cavalryman symbolised the martial strength of the Vijayanagara Empire. It can be interpreted that, to proclaim themselves as the rightful heirs to the Chola legacy, the Vijayanagara rulers commissioned the monumental tiger-hunting sculptures in the Sesharayar Mandapa at Srirangam—one of the grandest temples in *Cholamandalam*. In fact, the desire to assert superiority over the Cholas was not unique to the Vijayanagara Empire. Following his victory over the Cholas at Talakadu in the 12th century, the Hoysala king Vishnuvardhana adopted the image of Sala—or Poysala—fighting a tiger as the emblem of his dynasty, sculpting it in numerous temples. While the scene of Sala slaying the tiger visually represents a Kannada legend concerning the origins of the Hoysalas, historians argue that both the legend and its iconographic prominence gained political significance only after their triumph over the Cholas.

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[38] Akshay Chavan, "The City Of The 'Conqueror Of The Ganges'!," *Live History India,* July 30, 2017, https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/amazing-india/the-city-of-the-conqueror-of-the-ganges/. (June 4, 2021).

[39] Burton Stein, *The New Cambridge History of India: Vijayanagara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14.

Figure 9: Hoyasala's Royal Emblem at the Chennakeshava Temple, Belur
Source: Photograph by Avinash Krishnanurthy[40]

Guardians of the Temple

The origin story of the Srirangam Temple is recounted in the *Śrīraṅga Māhātmya*, a text traditionally regarded as part of the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, one of the eighteen *Mahāpurāṇas*. According to this legend, the *Sriranga vimana*—the sanctum housing the *swayamvyakta* (self-manifested) image of Ranganatha—emerged from the ocean in response to the intense penance performed by Brahma. Brahma then appointed Surya to conduct the daily worship of the deity. In time, Ikshvaku, a descendant of Surya and king of Ayodhya, found it increasingly difficult to worship the vimana at *Satyaloka*, the celestial abode. After a century of penance, he received Brahma's permission to bring the vimana to Ayodhya, where it was worshipped by successive kings of the Ikshvaku dynasty. This continued until the reign of Rama. After completing his fourteen-year exile and being crowned king, Rama

[40] Avinash Krishnanurthy, *Hoysala empire emblem, Sala killing the tiger, at the entrance to Chennakeshava Temple at Belur*, photograph, September 30, 2013, accessed on June 7, 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hoysala_empire_emblem,_Sala_killing_the_tiger,_at_the_entrance_to_Chennakeshava_temple_at_Belur.jpg.

conducted the *Ashvamedha* sacrifice in Ayodhya. Among the invited rulers was Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana and now the king of Lanka. As a token of gratitude for his alliance during the war against Ravana, Rama gifted Vibhishana the *Sriranga vimana*. Carrying it reverently on his head, Vibhishana began his journey back to Lanka (Figure 10). When he reached the banks of the Kaveri, he paused to rest and placed the vimana on the ground. At this moment, Dharmavarma, a Chola king, learned of the arrival of the sacred vimana and earnestly requested Vibhishana to remain for a few days so that he and his people might also worship the deity. Vibhishana agreed and stayed as Dharmavarma's guest. However, on the day of his departure, he found that the vimana had become immovable. The god then manifested and told Vibhishana that he had chosen to remain on the banks of the Kaveri. To honour Vibhishana's devotion, the deity would lie in a southward-facing position—unusual for a Vishnu shrine—symbolically gazing toward Lanka.[41]

Figure 10: Vibishana holding *Sriranga vimana*
Source: Photograph by the author.

[41] Hari Rao, *The Srirangam Temple,* 1.

In addition to the colossal, three-dimensional figures that emerge from the columns, the figural composite pillars of the Sesharayar Mandapa also bear a range of intricate relief sculptures depicting gods, mythological episodes, warriors, dancers, and erotic couples. Among these, the sixth pillar from the east features a particularly intriguing image: a demon-like figure (*Asura*) holding a miniature vimana. For those familiar with the *Sthala Purāṇa* of Srirangam, this iconography is readily identifiable as Vibhishana bearing the *Sriranga vimana* on his journey from Ayodhya to Lanka. Notably, this is the only known sculptural representation within the Srirangam Temple complex that visually narrates its mythic origin story. This uniqueness raises a critical question: why was this episode, central to the temple's sacred geography and spiritual identity, chosen for depiction specifically in the Sesharayar Mandapa and not elsewhere within the temple's vast architectural expanse?

Earlier generations of historians have often argued that the Hindu-Muslim conflict played a pivotal role in shaping the Vijayanagara Kingdom, positioning it as a resistance to Islam and a defender of Hindu identity. For example, Krishnaswami Aiyangar stated that the last ruler of the Hoysala dynasty, Vira Ballala III, "made a patriotic effort to dislodge the Muhammadans from the South… fell in the effort, and brought his dynasty to an end in carrying on this great national war of the Hindus."[42] Aiyangar contended that the Vijayanagara Empire inherited this 'patriotic national' mission, which was defined by resistance to Islamic rule. Although this interpretation of Vijayanagara as a staunch defender of Hindu South against the Islamic incursions remains popular in certain circles, recent scholarship has challenged this view.

Historians such as Wagoner have argued that the Vijayanagara Empire was not merely a conservative preserver of classical Hinduism but actively engaged with Islamic cultures. Furthermore, some historians emphasize that the conflicts between the Vijayanagara Empire and its regional subordinates, including the Nayakas, were more frequent and significant than its battles with the Bahmani Sultanate and other Islamic rulers.[43] Nevertheless, it remains plausible to argue that the Vijayanagara rulers took significant pride in

[42] Stein, *The New Cambridge History,* 5.
[43] Branfoot, "'Expanding Form'," 205.

recovering the Srirangam Temple from Muslim control, seeing it as a symbolic victory and affirmation of their authority over the region.

As mentioned earlier, the wealth of the Srirangam Temple was looted during Malik Kafur's expedition in 1311, and the temple was subsequently converted into a military camp following the establishment of the Sultanate of Madurai in 1323. According to tradition, the temple's high priests abandoned the site in time, carrying with them the procession images of the deities, valuable jewelry, and other essential items for worship. They took a circuitous route, passing through Tirukkotiyar, Kalaiyarkoil, Alagarkoil, Calicut, and Punganur, before finally reaching Tirupati, where the idols were placed in the Sri Venkateswara Temple. When the Srirangam Temple was recaptured in 1371, the Vijayanagara generals found that many of its structures had suffered significant destruction: gold plates covering the vimana, pillars, and walls had been peeled off; the temple treasury and granaries had been emptied; and the temple was left in a state of decay and ruin. Following the restoration of the procession idols to Srirangam, the Vijayanagara army, led by Kumara Kampana, set about renovating and restoring the temple. Inscriptions from this period tell us that Vijayanagara generals and governors made generous donations to the temple, including cows, gardens, villages, and gold. "The *Vimāna* was reconstructed and gilded, a fresh of Garuḍa was installed, the *Dhvajastambha* was covered with 102 gold plates, and many damaged shrines like those of Ānjanēya and Nammāḻvar were repaired."[44] Additionally, the temple complex itself was expanded, with several new architectural structures, such as gopurams and mandapas, being erected.

Since the Vijayanagara rulers played a crucial role in restoring a significant Vaishnavite shrine in South India, they likely saw themselves as the guardians of the Srirangam Temple. The *Sthala Purāṇa* relief image in the Sesharayar Mandapa can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the temple's entire legacy. The sculptures of large cavalry and foot soldiers carved alongside the *Sthala Purāṇa* image give the impression that the Srirangam Temple was well protected by the Vijayanagara Empire and its formidable army, symbolizing the empire's commitment to safeguarding the temple and its religious significance.

[44] Hari Rao, *The Srirangam Temple,* 5.

To Conclude

The Sri Ranganathaswami Temple is a major centre for South Indian Vaishnavism, and its renovation and expansion were significantly undertaken by the Vijayanagara and Nayaka rulers. The Sesharayar Mandapa, located on the east side of the fourth enclosure and southwest of the *Vellai Gopuram*, is a remarkable example of artistic achievement from this period. It stands as one of the most aesthetically impressive pillared halls in the Srirangam Temple. The colossal sculptures of rearing horses with riders armed with swords or spears emerging from the columns immediately capture attention, making the Mandapa an extraordinary feature. In addition to the cavalry, the columns also feature warriors, tigers, Portuguese soldiers, and *Kuravans*, each contributing to the temple's intricate visual narrative. By considering these figures within their socio-cultural and political context, we can uncover at least three layers of symbolic meaning embedded in these sculptures. While horses were used in battles by Tamil and other South Indian kings since the Sangam period, it was the Vijayanagara Empire that employed them on an unprecedented scale. As a result, the war-horse became a powerful symbol of sovereignty for the Vijayanagara rulers, who chose to immortalize these steeds in monumental sculptures in the columns of South Indian temples, including the Sri Ranganathaswami Temple. The prominence of cavalry in the columns emphasizes the horse as a metaphor for the Vijayanagara Empire's military prowess and dominance. The tiger hunting scenes at Sesharayar Mandapa, on the other hand, carry a more region-specific significance. The tiger was the royal emblem of the Chola dynasty, and depicting them being hunted by mounted warriors can be seen as a statement by the Vijayanagara rulers: the annexation of *Cholamandalam* and their assertion as the rightful successors to the mighty Cholas.

The Srirangam Temple, geographically located in the heartland of the Chola empire near their capital, Thanjavur, adds weight to this interpretation. Furthermore, the relief sculptures in the Mandapa, especially those illustrating the *Sthala Purāṇa* of the Srirangam Temple, carry site-specific meaning. The images of gigantic cavalry and foot soldiers, alongside the *Sthala Purāṇa* relief, suggest that the Vijayanagara kings sought to visually communicate the restoration of the Srirangam Temple from the occupation of the Madurai Sultanate, thereby positioning themselves as the temple's protectors. In this

way, the grand and monumental sculptures at Srirangam, when understood within the context of their creation, reveal the ideology, ambitions, and aspirations of the Vijayanagara Empire.

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Checkmate Chronicles: Reflections of nineteenth-century Awadh in Satyajit Ray's '*Shatranj ke Khilari*'

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"Shatranj ke Khilari," or 'The Chess Players,' is a historical drama set in 1856 during the colonial era, directed by the legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray, and based on the short story of the same name by renowned twentieth-century novelist Munshi Premchand. It is the only full-length Hindi feature film directed by Ray. The story depicts the contemporary aristocracy engrossed in luxuries, starkly detached from ground realities. The narrative focuses on two feudal lords from Awadh—Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali—who become consumed by shatranj (chess) while remaining completely unaware of the socio-political chaos unfolding around them. British East India Company troops move toward Awadh, while its extravagant Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah, stays indifferent, indulging in luxury and ignoring both his people's suffering and his kingdom's safety. Ray employs an allegorical representation of the chess game to illustrate how the Awadh nobility remained ignorant and complacent about the looming British annexation. The movie presents an intricate examination of noble extravagance set against the struggles faced by ordinary people, which worsened under British oppression. The work depicts cultural confrontations, where British principles and modernity face off against traditional Indian customs and values. "Shatranj ke Khilari" serves as a poignant commentary on Awadh's decline and the broader impact of colonialism on Indian society, using the metaphor of chess to explore power dynamics, politics, and historical change. It masterfully mirrors the socio-political scenario of nineteenth-century Awadh. In this paper, I explore the use of symbolism in the film, correlate the film with factual information, and examine the historicity of this path-breaking movie.

Keywords: History, Awadh, Satyajit Ray, Premchand, film, chess, power-politics, nawab.

The Film at a Glance

"*Shatranj Ke Khilari*" is a cinematic masterpiece released in 1977 that delves deep into the intricacies of human behaviour, political manoeuvrings, and the impact of colonialism on Indian society. Directed by Satyajit Ray, the film is a faithful yet innovative adaptation of Munshi Premchand's short story, capturing the essence of the original narrative while adding layers of complexity and depth. This film was the most expensive film Ray ever made, drawing as it did on Bombay film stars, along with stars of Western cinema,

and large period sets. Being Ray's first and only fictional film venture into a culture and a language not those of Bengal, writing a screenplay for it was challenging. In order to get around this, he brought in Urdu-speaking collaborators, mainly Javed Siddiqui and Shama Zaidi, and more professional actors.

The film opens with a panoramic view of the bustling city of Lucknow, capturing the essence of Awadh's cultural richness and political intrigue. Set in the historical backdrop of 1856, during the reign of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in the kingdom of Awadh, the film portrays two friends of noble descent, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, played by Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey respectively. These characters are emblematic of the decadence and apathy that had crept into the ruling class of Awadh, as their hours and honour are both swallowed by their obsession with the game of chess, because of which they remain oblivious to the contemporary political changes taking place. With very calculated steps, the British advanced towards Awadh. Rumours of General James Outram's strategic plans to annex the kingdom struck fear and uncertainty among the local nobility. However, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali remain detached from these concerns, choosing to fight on the chessboard rather than the battlefield.

The film intricately braids numerous narratives, displaying the stark differences between the opulent lifestyle of the aristocracy and the hardships faced by the commoners. The British East India Company targets Awadh for annexation, the calculative General James Outram, portrayed by Richard Attenborough, being an embodiment of the strategic nature of British imperialism. His character stands as a relentless power-seeker whose aggressive quest for dominance diametrically opposed the complacent attitude of the indigenous rulers. Rumours of British advancements towards Awadh led by General Outram, made the nobles shift uneasily on their velvet seats, yet for Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, their chess match was of a greater priority.

Throughout all this time, the Nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, remains immersed in his cultural reverie. The Nawab remains deeply engaged in extravagant celebrations and cultural activities while the British plan their domination, oblivious to the impending threat. Amjad Khan's performance

embodies the Nawab's charming persona while simultaneously depicting his ignorance regarding the state of affairs in his kingdom. The film's narrative unfolds with meticulous attention to detail, showcasing the grandeur of Lucknow, the capital of Awadh, as well as the growing tension and unrest among the people. The cinematography by Soumendu Roy captures the essence of the era, from the ornate palaces of the nobility to the bustling streets filled with commoners struggling to survive. One of the film's most striking elements is its portrayal of the game of chess as a metaphor for the power play between nations and individuals. Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali's obsession with chess reflects their detachment from the harsh realities of political intrigue and the impending threat of British annexation.

The climax of the film is both poignant and tragic, as the British forces finally take control of Awadh, signalling the end of an era. Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali engrossed in a game of chess until the very end, are confronted with the harsh reality of their lost kingdom and the futility of their obsession. In the aftermath of the annexation, the film explores the consequences of British rule on the local populace. The once vibrant city of Lucknow is transformed into a colonial outpost, with the British imposing their authority and restructuring the socio-political landscape. Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, now powerless and marginalised, symbolise the downfall of the traditional ruling class in the wake of the imperial conquest.

"*Shatranj Ke Khilari*" concludes with a haunting reflection on the human cost of political ambition and the tragic consequences of indifference. It stands out not only for its stellar performances, intricate storytelling, and rich visual aesthetics but also for its profound exploration of themes such as power, decadence, and the clash of cultures. Satyajit Ray's directorial finesse, combined with a stellar cast and a haunting musical score, elevates the film to a timeless classic that continues to resonate with audiences worldwide.

From Print to the Pictures

The film adaptation of "*Shatranj Ke Khilari*" excels in visually representing the historical setting, costumes, and ambience of nineteenth-century Awadh, rather than simply being an expansion of the story. Satyajit Ray's direction and cinematography capture the grandeur of the era, from the opulent palaces to

the bustling streets. The visual elements add a layer of authenticity and immerse viewers in the period setting, enhancing their engagement with the story. Symbolism has been extensively utilised to depict various themes. In contrast, the book relies on readers' imagination to visualise the scenes and settings based on the author's descriptions.

In his film, Ray utilises his creative freedom and scholastic knowledge to his fullest extent while keeping the base structure of the story intact. Ray breathes fresh life into little-explored characters such as those of the British Resident, the Nawab, and the wives of the feudal vassals, while incorporating new characters like the Queen Mother, the Minister, the child who watches the final chess match, and they offer new angles to gauge the emotional depth of each scene. While Premchand's tale ends on a note of total annihilation wherein both protagonists Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali fight to death over a chess match, Ray closes his film with an air of continuity, while retaining a sense of poignancy. Both protagonists make amends after an intense showdown. Ray masterfully depicts the closure of an old era and the simultaneous dawn of a new age.

In conclusion, "*Shatranj Ke Khilari*", in both its book and film form, offers a compelling narrative set against the backdrop of historical and political turmoil. Complementing each other, the book provides a crisp, detailed, and introspective exploration of characters and themes while the film brings the story to life through visual and auditory storytelling techniques, thus offering audiences a multifaceted experience of the timeless tale.

Historical Reflections

As stated earlier, the film is set in the 1850s, and subtly portrays the impact of British imperialism on Indian society, with British officers depicted as indifferent overlords, focused on their own pleasures amidst the political landscape of the time. Set against the backdrop of British colonial expansion, the film portrays the decline of Nawabi culture through its protagonists, who indulge in leisure while ignoring political duties leading up to the 1856 annexation of Awadh.

Political background

The film brilliantly mirrors the contemporary socio-political scenario, and traces the history of Awadh from the Treaty of Allahabad (1765) till the annexation of Awadh in 1856. Awadh, also known by the British as Oudh, was a princely state situated in the region of North India. With the decline of the Mughal Empire after Emperor Aurangazeb's death, Awadh became a province where governors began to consolidate their power. The governors of Awadh gradually increased their autonomy, transforming Awadh into an independent state. The British East India Company rose to paramountcy following the Battle of Buxar in 1764 wherein the combined forces of the Nawab of Awadh (Shuja-ud-daulah), the Nawab of Bengal, and the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II were defeated by the British. Following the battle, the Allahabad Treaty was signed in 1765 which provided that the East India Company would be paid Rs. 50 lakhs by Awadh. In exchange for this, both parties agreed to assist each other in the event of war with any other power. Thus Awadh fell under the nominal power of the British colonial powers after this battle.

The capital of Awadh was Faizabad until Asaf-ud-Daula shifted it to Lucknow in 1775 AD. In the short story by Premchand, a mosque built by Asaf-ud-Daula is mentioned, where Mir Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali play chess. British agents, referred to as "residents", established their base in Lucknow. The Nawab of Awadh constructed a Residency in Lucknow as part of a broader civic reform programme. Here it may be mentioned that the contemporary Resident was Sir James Outram, whose character Ray brought to life.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, Oudh was the repository of Mughal culture after the erosion of Mughal power in Delhi. The British recognised this and bestowed the power of kingship on the rulers of Oudh in 1814, while steadily undermining their sovereignty and revenues from 1765 onwards. They, and the city they embellished with palaces and mosques, gradually became bywords for decadent refinement in every department of life, whether it was dress, banquets, the hookah, pigeon-

breeding, music and poetry, or love-making; Lucknow in its heyday was the 'Paris of the East', the 'Babylon of India'.[1]

The Nawab of Awadh became increasingly dependent on the British to maintain law and order in the kingdom. The system of Subsidiary Alliance was imposed on Awadh by Lord Wellesley in 1801. In May 1816, the Kingdom of Awadh became a British protectorate. Wajid Ali Shah, who ascended the throne in 1822, was the tenth and last Nawab of Awadh. Despite Wajid Ali Shah's competent rule, the British residents submitted exaggerated reports about his incompetence to the company authorities. This provided the East India Company with a *Casus Belli* to annex Awadh.

On 7 February 1856, Lord Dalhousie ordered the deposition of Wajid Ali Shah due to alleged internal misrule. This was in accordance with Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse, which allowed the British to take over a kingdom in case of misrule. The Kingdom of Awadh was formally annexed in February 1856.

Mirroring the Society

Through characters like Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, who represent the indifferent ruling class, the movie delves into the decadence and detachment of the Indian aristocracy, showcasing their preoccupation with trivial pursuits like chess while remaining oblivious to the political and social upheavals around them. Meanwhile, the struggles of Mirza Mir, a common man fighting against social injustices and economic hardships, underscore the harsh realities faced by the lower classes. The film also subtly critiques the decline of traditional Indian culture and values, symbolised by the aristocrats' adoption of Western lifestyles and neglect of their heritage. Through the intricate symbolism of chess as a metaphor for power dynamics and strategic manoeuvering, "*Shatranj Ke Khilari*" invites viewers to reflect on the consequences of political indifference, class privilege, and cultural erosion in a society undergoing profound changes under colonial influence.

> लखनऊ विलासिता के रंग में डूबा हुआ था। छोटे-बड़े, गरीब-अमीर सभी विलासिता में डूबे हुए थे। कोई नृत्य और गान की मजलिस सजाता था, तो कोई अफीम की पीनक ही

[1] Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 241.

में मजे लेता था। जीवन के प्रत्येक विभाग में आमोद-प्रमोद का प्राधान्य था। शासन-विभाग में, साहित्य-क्षेत्र में, सामाजिक अवस्था में, कला-कौशल में, उद्योग-धंधों में, आहार-व्यवहार में सर्वत्र विलासिता व्याप्त हो रही थी। राजकर्मचारी विषय-वासना में, कविगण प्रेम और विरह के वर्णन में, कारीगर कलाबत्तू और चिकन बनाने में, व्यवसायी सुरमे, इत्र , मिस्सी और उबटन का रोजगार करने में लिप्त थे। सभी की आँखों में विलासिता का मद छाया हुआ था। संसार में क्या हो रहा है, इसकी किसी को खबर न थी। बटेर लड़ रहे हैं। तीतरों की लड़ाई के लिए पाली बदी जा रही है। कहीं चौसर बिछी हुई है; पौ-बारह का शोर मचा हुआ है। कही शतरंज का घोर संग्राम छिड़ा हुआ है। राजा से लेकर रंक तक इसी धुन में मस्त थे। यहाँ तक कि फकीरों को पैसे मिलते तो वे रोटियाँ न लेकर अफीम खाते या मदक पीते। शतरंज, ताश, गंजीफ़ा खेलने से बुद्धि तीव्र होती है, विचार-शक्ति का विकास होता है, पेंचीदा मसलों को सुलझाने की आदत पड़ती है।[2]

Lucknow was immersed in the colours of luxury. People of all ranks—rich and poor, high and low—were steeped in indulgence. Some held gatherings of dance and music, while others found pleasure in the stupor of opium. Every sphere of life was dominated by amusement and extravagance. Luxury had spread across the administration, the literary world, social life, the arts and crafts, industries and trades, and even food habits. Government officials were lost in sensual pleasures; poets were absorbed in verses of love and separation; artisans were busy weaving *kalabattu* and *chikan* embroidery; merchants were engaged in the trade of *surma* (*kohl*), perfumes, *missi*, and herbal cosmetics. The intoxication of luxury had clouded everyone's eyes. No one had any awareness of what was happening in the world. Quail fights were being held. Partridges were being trained for battle. Somewhere, dice games were laid out with cries of '*pauna baraah*' (a win), and elsewhere, intense battles of chess were underway. From kings to beggars, all were immersed in the same obsession. Even the fakirs, when given alms, wouldn't buy bread—they would consume opium or drink intoxicants. It was said that playing chess, cards, or *ganjifa* sharpens the mind, develops thinking skills, and creates a habit of solving complex problems.

[translation by author]

[2] Munshi Premchand, "शतरंज के खिलाड़ी," *Munshi Premchand*, accessed April 2, 2024, https://premchand.co.in/story/shatranj-ke-khiladi.

The system reeked with corruption. The subsidiary alliance with the British in 1801 deprived the Nawab of actual power, and he only remained the titular head of the state. The sole motive of his subordinates was acquiring wealth and leading a luxurious life. This is evident from the fact that the vassals of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, Mir Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, instead of supplying the Nawab with soldiers at a time of crisis, concentrated on winning their chess game instead of the real battle against the British. The utter collapse of law and order can be seen from the following statement in the film when Mir Roshan Ali is questioned about the firearm that he was carrying:

> *Nawab Wajid Ali Shah ke ahed mein nihatte ghoomne waale ghar waapas nhi aate* (Those who roam around unarmed in the kingdom of Nawab Wajid Ali Khan, don't come back home).[3]

Awadh became synonymous with apathy. On the eve of the annexation of Awadh, when the Nawab lost his throne and the people lost their independence, this is what happened, as written by Munshi Premchand.

> यह वह अहिंसा न थी, जिस पर देवगण प्रसन्न होते हैं। यह वह कायरपन था, जिस पर बड़े-बड़े कायर भी आँसू बहाते हैं। अवध के विशाल देश का नवाब बन्दी चला जाता था, और लखनऊ ऐश की नींद में मस्त था। यह राजनीतिक अधःपतन की चरम सीमा थी।[4]
>
> This was not the kind of nonviolence that pleased the gods. It was a cowardice so deep that even the most cowardly would weep over it. While the Nawab of the vast land of Awadh was being taken captive, Lucknow remained lost in the slumber of luxury. This was the absolute nadir of political decline.
>
> [translation by author]

Use of Symbolism

"*Shatranj Ke Khilari*" (The Chess Players) by Satyajit Ray is replete with symbolism, masterfully woven into the narrative to convey deeper meanings

[3] Banti Kumar, "Shatranj Ke Khilari {HD} Satyajit Ray, Sanjeev Kumar, Shabana Azmi, Hindi Film (With Eng Subtitles)," January 11, 2015, YouTube video, 2:09:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3Fgm0yaWbA.

[4] Premchand, "शतरंज के खिलाड़ी."

and thematic layers. The film employs various symbols that enrich the storytelling and offer insights into the characters' motivations, the historical context, and broader socio-political themes. Here are some key instances of symbolism in "*Shatranj Ke Khilari*:"

1. **Chess Game**: The most prominent symbol in the film is the game of chess itself, which serves as a metaphor for the power struggles of the era. The chess players, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali represent different approaches to dealing with the changing political landscape. Mir is obsessed with playing chess, symbolising the aristocracy's detachment from the harsh realities of governance and their focus on trivial pursuits. On the other hand, Mirza Sajjad Ali's reluctance to play reflects his concern for the fate of Awadh and his resistance to colonial influence.

Their apathy towards their duty and attitude towards the contemporary political scenario are reflected here:

> मिरज़ा: किसी के दिन बराबर नहीं जाते। कितनी दर्दनाक हालत है।
> मीर: हाँ, सो तो है ही- यह लो, फिर किश्त! बस, अबकी किश्त में मात है, बच नहीं सकते।
> मिरज़ा: खुदा की कसम, आप बड़े बेदर्द हैं। इतना बड़ा हादसा देखकर भी आपको दुःख नहीं होता। हाय, गरीब वाजिदअली शाह!
> मीर: पहले अपने बादशाह को तो बचाइए फिर नवाब साहब का मातम कीजिएगा। यह किश्त और यह मात! लाना हाथ![5]
>
> MIRZA: No man's fortune stays constant. What a heartbreaking turn of events.
> MIR: Indeed, that's how it is — here, take this move! With this one, it's checkmate. There's no way out now.
> MIRZA: By God, you are truly unfeeling. Even in the face of such a tragedy, you show no sorrow? Alas, poor Wajid Ali Shah!
> MIR: First, save your own king — then grieve for the Nawab. Here's the move… and there's your checkmate! Now, give me your hand!
> [translation by author]

[5] Ibid.

2. **The Chess Pieces**: Each chess piece represents a specific persona of the society: The king symbolises authority and power, the queen represents influence and manipulation, the knights embody loyalty and courage, the bishops signify religion and morality, and the pawns depict common people trapped in the power games of the elite. Their final moves on the chessboard towards the end of the movie mirror the final moments of Awadh's sovereignty, highlighting the futility of their obsession in the face of imminent collapse. Mir Sajjad Ali while playing his piece, says:

> *Wazir sahab aap hat jaiye,*
> *Malka Victoria dashvi padhar rahi hai*
> (Mr. Prime Minister, you move aside,
> Queen Victoria is coming [signifying the onset of the rule of Queen Victoria in Awadh, as well as the rest of India])[6]

3. **The Clock**: The ticking clock in the background serves as a reminder of the passage of time and the impending changes facing Awadh. It symbolises the inevitability of progress and modernity, which threatens to erode the traditional way of life and cultural heritage.

4. **The Mirror**: The scene where Mirza Sajjad Ali gazes into a broken mirror reflects his own fragmented identity and the disillusionment of the aristocracy. The shattered mirror symbolises the disintegration of old values and the loss of identity in a changing world.

5. **The Elephant**: The elephant is featured in the film as a reminder of Awadh's past glory and the fading influence of the Nawab.

6. **The Dust Storm**: The climactic dust storm symbolises the chaos and upheaval brought about by colonialism and political betrayal. It highlights the termination of the old era, which had fallen into stagnation, and the beginning of a new, uncertain future for Awadh.

7. **The Red Coat**: General Outram's red coat symbolises British imperialism and military dominance. Red is the colour of revolution, red denotes change, and above all, red signifies bloodshed. It serves as a visual reminder of the

[6] Kumar, "Shatranj Ke Khilari."

colonial presence and the threat posed to indigenous rulers like Nawab Wajid Ali Shah.

8. **The Courtyard**: The courtyard where the chess game takes place symbolises the arena of power and competition. It represents the political landscape of Awadh, where alliances are forged, betrayals occur, and destinies are decided.

9. **The Courtesan's Song**: The song performed by the courtesan in the Nawab's court serves as a metaphor for the allure of power and the temptations faced by those in positions of authority. It reflects the seductive nature of wealth, luxury, and privilege, which can distract rulers from their duties.

10. **The Sparrows**: The scene with the sparrows trapped in a cage symbolises the loss of freedom and innocence. It mirrors the plight of the common people who are marginalised and oppressed by the ruling elite and colonial powers.

11. **The Broken Chandelier**: The broken chandelier in the Nawab's palace symbolises the decay and decline of the aristocracy. It represents the crumbling infrastructure and neglect of public welfare under frivolous and ineffective leadership. A broken chandelier denotes the absence of light, thus depicting the darkness that Awadh had plunged into because of the utter negligence and selfishness of the aristocracy.

12. **The Puppet Show**: The puppet show depicting the British annexation of Awadh symbolises the manipulation of power and the loss of sovereignty. It reveals how local rulers like Nawab Wajid Ali Shah were often pawns in the larger game of colonial expansion. Awadh eventually became a subsidiary ally of the British.

16. **The Empty Throne**: The empty throne in the Nawab's court symbolises the absence of effective leadership and governance. It represents the vacuum created by Nawab's indulgence in trivial pursuits and his failure to fulfil his responsibilities towards his people.

17. **The Cherries:** Towards the beginning of the film, Ray masterfully presents a cartoon which depicts the annexation of the princely States. It shows the

British eating cherries which are labelled as Princely States one by one, starting from Punjab to Burma, Nagpur, Satara, Jhansi, and finally Awadh.

18. **The Crown of the Nawab:** The intricately crafted crown, which graced the head of the Nawab of Awadh, was sent for an exhibition in London by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. On seeing it, the words of the Governor-General, Dalhousie, which were reiterated in the film, were as follows: "The wretch at Lucknow who sent his crown to the... ...exhibition would have done his people and us a great service if he had sent head in it and he never would have missed it. That is the cherry that would drop into our mouth one day".[7] Being a man of his word, his tenure as Governor-General ended the same year as the annexation of Awadh, i.e. 1856.

19. **The Duel:** Matters come to a head when the chess players, towards the end of the film, enter a dispute regarding the game and start cursing each other's bloodline. This happens in the backdrop of the British army approaching Awadh. Mir Roshan Ali draws his pistol and accidentally fires it. Luckily, it misses Mirza Sajjad Ali, and Mir Roshan is deeply ashamed. The sheer irony is the fact that, while they did not move an inch to defend their territories from the British onslaught to preserve the sovereignty of Awadh, they did not hesitate to draw arms against each other over a small dispute regarding the game of chess. Their sense of "honour" superseded their sense of duty.

In the book, it is shown that they drew their swords and fought to the death. Premchand writes:

> दोनों दोस्तों ने कमर से तलवारें निकाल लीं। नवाबी जमाना था; सभी तलवार, पेशकब्ज, कटार वगैरह बाँधते थे। दोनों विलासी थे, पर कायर न थे। उनमें राजनीतिक भावों का अधःपतन हो गया था- बादशाह के लिए, बादशाहत के लिए क्यों मरें; पर व्यक्तिगत वीरता का अभाव न था। दोनों जख्म खाकर गिरे, और दोनों ने वहीं तड़प-तड़पकर जानें दे दीं। अपने बादशाह के लिए जिनकी आँखों से एक बूँद आँसू न निकला, उन्हीं दोनों प्राणियों ने शतरंज के वजीर की रक्षा में प्राण दे दिये।[8]

[7] Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), 140.

[8] Premchand, "शतरंज के खिलाड़ी."

> Both friends drew the swords from their waists. It was the age of the Nawabs—everyone carried swords, daggers, or poniards. The two were indulgent men, but they were no cowards. Their sense of political duty had decayed—why should they lay down their lives for the king or the kingdom? And yet, they lacked no personal courage. Wounded, both fell to the ground and there, writhing in pain, they breathed their last. For their king, not a single tear had been shed—yet for the protection of a chess piece, the wazir, both laid down their lives.
>
> [translation by author]

In the film, however, after their tempers cool, Mir Roshan feels deeply ashamed, and they make amends. They ultimately resort to another game of chess. The emotional exchange between two proud friends has been subtly yet impactfully shown in the film:

> (After the shots have been fired and the dust seems to settle Mirza Sajjad asks Mir Roshan whether he is upset over the onslaught of the British)
>
> MIR ROSHAN: I am not upset about this.
> MIRZA SAJJAD: Then why are you upset?
> MIR ROSHAN: That, with whom will I play chess now?
> MIRZA SAJJAD: You have a player here before you and there are... ...kebabs and bread. Eat on and play on. *Khaate jaiye khelte jaiye.* We'll go back home as soon as it is dark. The dark is necessary for hiding the face, Mir Sahib. *Muh chhupane ke liye andhera zaroori hai sahib.*[9]

These symbols collectively contribute to the thematic richness of "*Shatranj Ke Khilari,*" adding layers of meaning and depth to the narrative. They invite viewers to interpret the film beyond its surface plot, encouraging reflections on power dynamics, moral dilemmas, and the consequences of historical events for individuals and societies.

[9] Kumar, "Shatranj Ke Khilari."

Ray's Portrayal of hitherto Unexplored Characters

Ray, unlike Premchand, was not vociferous in condemning the irresponsible aristocracy. Ray chose not to take sides, since he was neither in support of feudalism nor in favour of colonialism. Instead, he used his film as a medium for the audience to interpret and analyse on their own, using their respective ideological standpoints. Ray himself summed up his view as follows:

> Easy targets don't interest me very much. The condemnation is there, ultimately, but the process of arriving at it is different. I was portraying two negative forces, feudalism and colonialism. You had to condemn both Wajid and Dalhousie. This was the challenge. I wanted to make this condemnation interesting by bringing in certain plus points of both the sides… by investing their representatives with certain human traits. These traits are not invented but backed by historical evidence. I knew this might result in a certain ambivalence of attitude, but I didn't see Shatranj as a story where one would openly take sides and take a stand. I saw it more as a contemplative, though unsparing view of the clash of two cultures – one effete and ineffectual and the other vigorous and malignant. I also took into account the many half-shades that lie in between these two extremes of the spectrum…. You have to read this film between the lines.[10]

There are several characters whom Ray breathed life into, due to which the film received more depth and background compared to the novel.

The King

The Nawab Wajid Ali Shah has been skilfully portrayed as a connoisseur of beauty and refinement, a patron of the arts who values creativity and expression above all else. However, this cultural extravaganza, often scaling to manic proportions, is a facade for the detachment and obliviousness of the monarch to the political realities of his time. Immersed in pleasurable pursuits and hedonistic activities rather than the affairs of the State, he remains blissfully unaware of the manipulations and deceptive activities of the British

[10] Robinson, *Satyajit Ray*, 288. For detailed reminiscences of Ray, see Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films* (New York: Hyperion, 1994).

East India Company until he gets checkmated. Despite his flaws and vulnerabilities, Wajid Ali Shah is also portrayed with empathy and humanity. With a certain vulnerability and naivety, he is shown as a compassionate ruler who cares for his people and is loved by them in return. His interactions with his subjects reveal a genuine concern for their welfare, although this concern is often overshadowed by his indulgences.

The film's depiction of Wajid Ali Shah intertwines fact with fiction by drawing from historical records while incorporating artistic interpretation. The film presents his cultural legacy and artistic pursuits accurately, yet reduces certain personality traits to fit into Ray's cinematic storytelling. The work manages to deliver an intricate and stirring portrayal of a multifaceted historical character entangled in cultural fervour and political unrest.

Ray himself pointed out that Wajid Ali Shah was such an incompetent ruler that he had to force himself to feel sympathetic to him to make the film. At several points, he felt like giving up the film altogether and wrote to say so in several letters jointly addressed to his Urdu collaborator Shama Zaidi and to Bansi Chandragupta, who was then in Bombay too. On one occasion, Zaidi had written to Ray offering to translate Wajid Ali's autobiography for him, in which the King describes his sex life from the age of eight. "Manikda (Ray) said– don't tell me all this because then I'll dislike him even more," Shama recalled with a laugh.[11] Later Ray remarked:

> I think there were two aspects to Wajid Ali Shah's character, one which you could admire and one which you couldn't. At one point I wrote to Shama that I just could not feel any sympathy for this stupid character. And unless I feel some sympathy I cannot make a film. But then finally, after long months of study, of the nawabs, of Lucknow, and of everything, I saw the King as an artist, a composer who made some contributions to the form of singing that developed in Lucknow. The fact that he was a great patron of music– that was one redeeming feature about this King.[12]

[11] Ibid., 241.
[12] Ibid., 288.

From the earliest scenes, Ray emphasises the king's musicality to show his passion for the fine arts, primarily to de-vilify the absolute carelessness of royalty. The sheer irony screened in the film is that while all his subjects revelled in war-like games such as chess, cockfighting, and mock duels, the king revelled in cultural pursuits and sensual pleasures. The song that he created is a reference to the sorrowful plight of the State of Awadh and the Nawab.

> *Tadap tadap sagari rain gujari*
> *Kaun des gayo sawariya*
> *Hoa bhar aayi ankhiyaan madwari*
> *Tadap tadap gayi chunariyaa*
>
> *Tumhare ghodan mere*
> *Dwaare se jo nikase*
> *Sudh bhul gayi mai bawariya*
> *Dwaare se jo nikase*
> *Sudh bhul gayi mai bawariya.*[13]
>
> The night passes away in suffering
> To which country has gone my soul mate
> My soulful eyes are tearful
> They are yearning, and waiting for you.
>
> When your horses left from my doorway
> I took leave of my senses, crazy woman that I am
> The night passes away in suffering
> To which country has gone my soul mate.[14]

This paints the situation of Awadh, which was slowly descending into the gaping jaws of the British Empire. "*Shatranj ke Khilari*" offers a nuanced portrayal of Wajid Ali Shah as a cultural enthusiast and a vulnerable ruler, highlighting both his strengths and weaknesses in the face of colonial encroachment. It invites viewers to contemplate the intersection of art, politics, and power in the historical context of nineteenth-century Awadh.

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[13] Kumar, "Shatranj Ke Khilari." 1:04:41-1:06:00,

[14] Ibid., 1:53:43.

The Prime Minister

This is a novel character that Ray introduced in the film—Wazir of Wajid Ali Shah, Madaruddowla. It feels as if he represents the director's thoughts in the film. A sense of disappointment in the king's activities yet a feeling of loyalty towards the royal dynasty, Madaruddowla is helplessness personified. Portrayed by the iconic Victor Banerjee, this character is laced with melancholy and dilemma.

Women

In *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, Satyajit Ray subtly subverts the conventional portrayal of women in period dramas by endowing them with agency, intelligence, and emotional depth, despite the backdrop of a deeply patriarchal and aristocratic nineteenth-century society. The King's mother, or the Queen Mother/*Rajmata*, is shown to be authoritative. While the king remained immersed in leisure and sensual activities, it was the Queen's mother who spoke to the British authorities when they declared that they would annex the State of Awadh—power behind the Purdah.

The wives of Mir Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali both have been given substantial personalities—a notable departure from the stereotypical depictions of aristocratic women as either decorative or docile. Mir Sajjad Ali's wife (played by Shabana Azmi) is sharp-tongued, perceptive, and deeply frustrated by her husband's escapist tendencies. Her sarcastic remarks and increasing isolation highlight the domestic cost of male detachment. In one scene, when her husband is preparing to sneak out yet again to play chess, she curtly questions whether he would remember the way back home—a line laced with irony, pain, and suppressed anger. Far from being a passive character, she voices her resentment and reveals the emotional vacuum created by her husband's indifference. Mir Roshan Ali's wife, though gentler in demeanour, also reflects quiet dissatisfaction. She is portrayed as dutiful but emotionally neglected, resigned to her husband's obsession with the game. Yet later on it is revealed that she has a lover and hence her personality is unexplored, like a veil which has not been lifted by the husband. She was smart enough to keep her husband pacified and inebriated with his chess addiction and discreetly managed her personal affairs. The contrast between

these two women allows Ray to showcase the different ways in which women cope with emotional abandonment and patriarchal negligence. Ray's portrayal of women, thus, complicates the narrative of the decline in feudal Lucknow. While the men of the court and nobility are lost in games, poetry, and inertia, the women emerge as figures of reason, resilience, and unacknowledged strength.[15]

Advocate Abbajan

A character with seemingly no importance, Abbajan is an elderly advocate lying on his deathbed. He cannot do anything except emit sounds of anguish. The chess players had entered his house to obtain his chess board when they were ousted from their homes by their spouses. i.e. The complete helplessness of Abbajan symbolically portrays an arena of chaos.

The Servants

Ray's magical lens breathed life into the lives of the servants of the feudal lords. The servants are shown to be serving quietly yet discussing amongst themselves the disorderly state of the households in the absence of the "Man of the House". They also take advantage of this situation and are lethargic. This reflects the condition of the State—absentee government, corrupt administration, and unproductive populace.

The Child

The Child who serves food to Mir Roshan Ali and Mir Sajjad Ali when they decide to play chess near the masjid reflects the new generation. They have witnessed the decadence of the aristocracy and the collapse of administration. They also experienced the dawn of a new era, with the coming of the British. Being disgruntled with the *ancien regime*, they were the ones who rose to usher in social changes and reform the society.

[15] For useful insights into the question of masculinities in Satyajit Ray's films, see Debarati Sanyal, "Introduction: Satyajit Ray's Films, His Men and the Inscription of the Nation," in *Failed Masculinities: The Men in Satyajit Ray's Films*, 1–22 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

General James Outram and Captain Weston

These two British characters have been given flesh and blood by Satyajit Ray. The British Resident has only been casually referenced in Premchand's novel. Richard Attenborough's portrayal of General James Outram epitomises the strategic and calculating essence of British imperialism. In 1854, he was appointed Resident at Lucknow, in which capacity two years later he carried out the annexation of Oudh and became the first Chief Commissioner of that province. In the film, Outram's character embodies a relentless drive for power and dominance, starkly contrasting the complacency of the local rulers. He also receives a cultural shock. Meanwhile, Captain Weston, portrayed by Tom Alter, is a subordinate officer under Outram, who is somewhat sympathetic to the plea of the Nawab and harbours an affection towards the local culture and customs. Weston has learnt the local Urdu language and often helps Outram, who has received a huge cultural shock ever since coming to India, in deciphering Indian habits and customs. He even explains and recites *Shayris* to Outram. Sometimes he reads out his self-composed poems. Outram and Weston may well represent the Anglicist and the Orientalist mindsets respectively. The Anglicists were critics of Indian society and culture and staunch advocates of the supremacy of Western education and culture, while the Orientalists were interested in Indology and the promotion of ancient Indian culture and methods of education.

A small yet impactful dialogue from the film between General Outram and Captain Weston is as follows:

> (an hour-by-hour account of the king's activities… dated the 24th of January… that's yesterday.)
>
> OUTRAM: Do you know the king prays five times a day?
> WESTON: Five is the number prescribed by the Koran, sir.
> OUTRAM: Surely, all Muslims don't pray five times a day.
> WESTON: Well, not all, sir but some do.
> OUTRAM: The king being one of them.
> WESTON: The king is known to be a very devout man, sir.
> OUTRAM: I see. The king listened to a new singer, Mustali Bai… and afterwards he amused himself by… flying kites on the palace roof.

> That's at 4 p.m., when the king goes to sleep for an hour… but he is up in time for the third prayer at 5 p.m.… and then, in the evening… where is it… here it is… the king recited a new poem on the loves of the Bulbul?
> WESTON: A bird, sir. The pheasant nightingale.
> OUTRAM: …after the mushaira. What's mushaira?
> WESTON: Mushaira is a gathering of poets. They recite the new poems.
> OUTRAM: I see.[16]

The Language

The language spoken in the film differs noticeably from the classical Urdu used in Munshi Premchand's original short story, though it retains the cultural flavour and thematic relevance. Premchand's prose is steeped in a literary, high-register Urdu—richly layered with Persian and Arabic vocabulary, long syntactic structures, and moralistic irony. His narrative voice, for example, uses phrases like "विलासिता के रंग में डूबा हुआ था" (was immersed in the colours of luxury) or "शतरंज, ताश, गंजीफा खेलने से बुद्धि तीव्र होती है…" (playing chess, cards, ganjifa sharpens the mind...), expressing both satire and social commentary through elevated diction.

In contrast, the film's dialogue—written by Shama Zaidi and Javed Siddiqui—adopts a more colloquial and performable register of Hindustani (a blend of Hindi and Urdu) that would be accessible to a 1970s audience while still evoking the grace of mid-nineteenth-century Lucknow. Ray was deeply conscious of linguistic nuance, and his adaptation reflects a calibrated stylistic variation across characters. For instance, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (played by Amjad Khan) speaks in a poetic, rhythmical Urdu that reflects his artistic temperament: in one scene, he laments the political tension with a line "क्या मैं शायर नहीं हूँ? क्या मैं तानसेन का वारिस नहीं हूँ?" (Am I not a poet? Am I not the heir to Tansen?).[17] This usage, while stylised, is lighter and more dramatic than Premchand's reflective narration.

Meanwhile, the two noblemen Mirza and Mir (played by Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey) speak in a refined but comically self-absorbed dialect. For

[16] Ibid., 1:43-55.
[17] Ibid., 00:15:20–25.

example, Mirza exclaims in a key moment, "हमारी शतरंज कोई मामूली शतरंज नहीं है" (Our chess is no ordinary chess!), underscoring their delusional detachment from political reality. Such lines retain the satirical intent of Premchand's original but are simplified for cinematic delivery. Commoners and servants in the film speak a more Awadhi-tinged, earthy Hindustani, offering regional texture and comic contrast, while the narration—voiced by Amitabh Bachchan—remains closest to Premchand's literary tone, using more elevated language and formal phrasing to frame the story.

Ray's film thus constructs a linguistic hierarchy: narration rooted in literary Urdu, elite characters speaking stylised yet accessible Hindustani, and supporting characters using vernacular forms. The film does not replicate Premchand's prose verbatim, but rather transforms it for the medium of cinema, preserving its spirit while adapting its form. In doing so, Ray ensures that the essence of decay, irony, and cultural elegance in Premchand's tale is felt not just through visuals, but through voice as well.

Debating Decadence: Contextualising Awadh

The depiction of nineteenth-century Awadh, especially under Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, as a bastion of cultural opulence and political apathy has been a dominant narrative in both literary and cinematic representations. However, recent historical scholarship cautions against accepting this portrayal at face value and calls for a more nuanced appraisal of the so-called "decadence" of Awadh.

In her seminal book, *The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah*, Rosie Llewellyn-Jones argues that the Nawab's apparent lack of interest in politics was more than a sign of incompetence– it was a characteristic of the ruler with a programme for maintaining a rich, syncretic and culturally lively court life in the face of increasing British intervention. Far from being the indulgent sensualist figure, Wajid Ali Shah was a deeply religious, artistic, and sensitive man who followed the cultural programme of kingship. He actively patronised Urdu theatre, Kathak dance, and Hindustani classical music, and wrote several plays, ghazals, and treatises on devotional music and poetry. Jones argues that many British officials, such as General Outram, deliberately misinterpreted this cultural patronage as political complacency—an image

which the colonial rationale for annexation required. British accounts emphasised "misrule" to justify Lord Dalhousie's application of the Doctrine of Lapse, when Awadh was not in its normal jurisdiction.[18]

Rudrangshu Mukherjee's *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance* offers a different critical perspective to the argument. Mukherjee shows that the image of Awadh as politically stagnant is a myth that is broken when one examines the extensive and organised rebellion that broke out shortly after its annexation. Awadh, after annexation, was the focal point of resistance to the Revolt of 1857, not because of the ill will of the dispossessed taluqdars alone but also because of popular outrage among sepoys, peasants, and artisans. Mukherjee is keen to point out that Wajid Ali Shah was hugely beloved by his people, as seen in the symbolic invocation of his name during the rebellion, well after he had been forced into exile in Calcutta. Such post-annexation resistance corroborates that the political decline commonly ascribed to Awadh was neither universal nor unopposed.[19]

In addition, both Mukherjee and Jones reject the binary opposition so often sketched between a "progressive" British imposition and a "backward" native regime. The British depiction of the Nawab's court as one of extravagance and debauchery was part of a larger Orientalist project to represent native rulers as morally unfit to rule. However, Awadh's court and urban culture—especially in Lucknow—were one of the most sophisticated in the subcontinent, and one of the very origins of a distinctive Indo-Persian aesthetic that infused everything from architecture to etiquette. This culture, so abhorred as decadent, was actually a living tradition of composite culture (*Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*), one that was systematically destroyed after annexation.

Thus, whilst '*Shatranj ke Khilari*' beautifully brings the metaphor of internal dissolution to life through the medium of chess, secondary sources inform us that the historical reality was a good deal more complex. The fall of Awadh was as much the creation of deliberate imperial strategy, manipulated news of misgovernment, and the suppression of cultural diversity as it was of

[18] Jones, *The Last King*.

[19] Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

aristocratic sloth. Sophisticated analyses of the context by historians like Llewellyn-Jones and Mukherjee allow us to appreciate Ray's film not merely as a condemnation of feudal sloth but as a eulogy for a lost world, one poised between the cruelty of empire and the fragility of culture.

Conclusion

"*Shatranj ke Khilari*" serves as a poignant commentary on Awadh's decline and the broader impact of colonialism on Indian society, using the metaphor of chess to explore power dynamics, politics, and historical change. The film's evocative imagery, coupled with Satyajit Ray's masterful direction, leaves a lasting impact on the audience, prompting contemplation on themes of power, responsibility, and the clash between tradition and modernity. It is a cinematic *tour de force* that transcends its historical setting to explore universal themes of human nature and societal change. Through its rich narrative tapestry, memorable performances, and poignant storytelling, the film remains a timeless classic that continues to resonate with audiences, offering insights into the complexities of power dynamics and the enduring legacy of colonialism. Both Premchand's narrative and Ray's storytelling skilfully intertwine historical events with human emotions, offering a critical perspective on societal issues and the impact of colonialism.

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Subaltern Voice and the Colonial Archive: Collective Petitions from the Indigo Rebellion

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This essay explores petitions as a crucial genre of response to colonial authority, emphasizing their role in articulating grievances without direct confrontation. Focusing on petitions submitted by villagers from the Bengal countryside during the Indigo Rebellion, it relocates the practice of petitioning beyond urban spaces and elite actors. This analysis engages with the methodological framework of Subaltern Studies to interrogate whether traces of the subaltern voice can be retrieved from the colonial archive. Central to this inquiry is a close examination of a petition submitted by ryots (peasants) of a village against an indigo planter over a land dispute. This case study sheds light on the intricate processes of mediation, appropriation, and reinterpretation that shape archival documents. Through a critical reading of the colonial archive, the essay highlights how petitions operated both as tools of resistance and as subjects of bureaucratic manipulation. Ultimately, this study reveals the inherent challenges of recovering subaltern perspectives from archival sources.

Keywords: Subaltern, Colonial archive, Indigo Rebellion, petitions, peasant, rural.

Introduction: Petitions and the Colonial Archive

One of the key challenges for historians dealing with colonial India has been navigating the archive. Among the early scholars critically dealing with the archive, Bernard Cohn showed us how the production and control over knowledge were fundamental to the project of colonialism in South Asia. This can be situated in a larger "historical turn" in anthropology, where its involvement with colonialism and the politics of knowledge production have been questioned. This has led to a critical reflection on archives as sites where

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anthropological knowledge is produced through ethnography, survey, and census.[1] Similarly, in history, the "archival turn" can be traced to Derrida's *Archive Fever*, which provided an impetus to historians to experiment with their sources, and as Ranajit Guha has warned us, sources are not "springs of real meanings" in themselves.[2] The critical engagement with archives has made us aware of archives as not just inert spaces for the storage of knowledge or material sites for a set of documents but as a proper process, as highlighted by Ann Laura Stoler.[3] This analytic shift, from archive as source to archive as subject, can be seen in Foucault's The *Archaeology of Knowledge*. For Foucault, the archive is not an institution but "the law of what can be said" and "the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. He defines the archive as a practice that determines what is filed rather than just a system of files.[4] This semantic shift in the understanding of archives influenced intellectual movements like the Subaltern Studies collective, a project of history-writing aims to recover the voice of subaltern subjects from the elite discourse of colonial and nationalist historiography.

Two contrasting but complementary methodologies are used by historians to read the colonial archives. One of them is to read the archive against the grain to extract the silenced subaltern voice, as shown by Guha in his seminal essays on subaltern studies. The other approach involves a close reading of the archive along the grain to better understand the anxieties of colonial knowledge.[5] Combining these two methods, this essay aims to undertake a critical reading of the colonial archive to find traces of subaltern voices and to grasp the complexities of archival production by looking at petitions.
Petitions constitute an interesting area of study in analysing responses of the colonised subjects to limitations imposed by colonial rule without direct confrontation. They also highlight the legal consciousness of the colonial

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[1] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Ranajit Guha, "The Proses of Counter-Insurgency", in *Culture, Power, History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1983] 1994), 336–37.

[3] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2002), 93, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435632.

[4] Michel Foucault, "The Statement and the Archive" in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 79–134.

[5] Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", 99.

subject, as the act of writing a petition demands the writer to be aware of the complex colonial bureaucratic-legal order and several other accepted norms. Hence, the archive does not preserve a petition if it is not written in the form and style dictated by the State. It has been suggested by scholars that petitions emerged as a popular method of negotiation and platform for criticism under the colonial State. In recent years, petitions have gained popularity, as a growing body of historical scholarship has started exploring how petitions have been shaped by the necessities of their historical context. The growing historiography in recent decades has provided us with contrasting opinions regarding these petitions. For example, in her seminal work "*The Document Raj*", Bhavani Raman highlighted how petitioning developed in colonial Madras as the State tried to communicate with its subjects. She argued that the State's effort to "discipline petitions into expressions of sincerity, while managing information flow, generated the peculiar form of the colonial petition."[6] She emphasised how the Company State in Madras considered petitions as the only legitimate form of dissent, making direct resistance and protest disorderly and unacceptable.[7]

In her work on the petition archive from early colonial Madras, Aparna Balachandran showed us how petitions offer a unique way of understanding the relationship between the State and its subject. Historicising the practice of petitioning in Madras, she has looked at the petitions through the lens of the subaltern, urban communities of the city. Accepting the fact that petitions in South Asia were a product of colonial rule, shaped by the distinctive language and format of colonial legality, Balachandran has attempted to find the subaltern voice present in them through critical examinations of the legal self-understanding of the petitioners.[8] From another point of view, Majid Siddiqi has argued that, even in the politeness and the strict protocols of language, petitions present "cultural systems of concord and discord, unities and

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[6] Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 161–91.

[7] Raman, *Document Raj, 161-191,* quoted in Prashant Kidambi, "The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, circa 1889–1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019), 203–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000555.

[8] Aparna Balachandran, "Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State in South India," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 150–76, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17001135.

fissures, legitimation and dissent." [9]Similarly, Prashant Kidambe, focusing on colonial Bombay, has analysed petitions as an event outside their documentary confines.[10]

In this essay, I have focused on the petitions written during the Indigo Rebellion of Bengal by villagers, especially those belonging to the agrarian countryside or mofussil, *under* British rule. Since petitioning and petitions have frequently been associated with urban spaces and their dwellers to communicate with the State, this essay takes a different approach by focusing on the petitions from the rural populace. When we look at the archive, we generally find petitions coming from a section of the educated middle class, taking advantage of their Western education and spatial proximity to the colonial administration. In contrast, the colonial State was largely distant and dependent on its zamindars and tax collectors in the agrarian countryside. This does not mean that the State was absent in rural spaces. In fact, as recent studies on agrarian history have shown, it was quite the opposite: the brunt of colonialism's extractive mechanism had to be borne by the peasants living in the village. However, the administrative apparatus of the State was situated in the city, and its physical, political, and cultural separation from the agrarian hinterland made the writing of a petition much more challenging. Thus, when one takes a preliminary look at petitions written by the inhabitants of a village from a certain district, hundreds of kilometres away from Calcutta, one cannot help but be astonished by the consciousness of the subaltern voice. However, as this essay will explore, an in-depth analysis of the archive bears quite surprising results, which make us reconsider our initial perception.

The Indigo Rebellion, the Blue Mutiny, or the *Nil Bidroho* of 1859-60, was the first major instance of mass protest confronted by the British Raj after the Crown's formal takeover in 1857. Existing historiography on the Indigo Rebellion has celebrated the movement as a pre-history of nonviolent protest and political consciousness in the countryside and among the peasantry. Many scholars such as Jogesh Chandra Bagal, Sisirkumar Ghosh, and R.C. Majumder romanticised the non-violent, Gandhian aspect of this peasant movement and

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[9] Siddiqi Majid, *The British Historical Context and Petitioning in Colonial India* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2005), 17–40.

[10] Prashant Kidambi, "The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, *circa* 1889-1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 203-39, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000555.

compared its success to the failure of the 1857 uprising. Leaving behind the nationalist enterprise of the early 20th century, recent studies on peasant movements have focused on several aspects of resistance and insurgency from the point of view of the peasant rather than the nation-state. Here, particularly in the works of Ranajit Guha and other scholars of the Subaltern school, the aim has been to recover the voice and consciousness of the subaltern peasant from the appropriation and dominance of the elite over historical narratives. A major instrument of such a method has been critical for re-reading the official colonial archive against the grain. This essay is, in part, an exercise inspired by the methodology implemented by the Subaltern studies collective to put to trial the claim that traces of subaltern voices can be retrieved from the colonial archive. To do so, it examines a particular genre of source material — the peasant petitions to the British government for justice against the oppression of indigo planters.

Background: Indigo Cultivation in Bengal

Before we begin to analyse our source, let us first understand its context through a brief detour into the history of indigo and its cultivation in Lower Bengal. Indigo was introduced as a cash crop in Bengal by the British. Its cultivation can be located in the larger process of commercialisation of agriculture, which began in the nineteenth century.[11] The improvement of communication routes to the hinterland led to a general expansion of trade in raw materials and agricultural produce. Indigo emerged as a global commodity for dyeing after the growth of the textile industry in England. Its introduction in Bengal was based on certain factors such as its increasing demand in the market and the decline of its supply from the West Indies and America after English planters abandoned the crop in favour of more profitable alternatives such as sugarcane. The East India Company initially started growing indigo in Bengal as a medium of remittance, since the trade in cotton and textiles gradually declined. The Company helped in the growth of Bengal indigo by advancing loans to planters and by protecting them from free

[11] Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, "Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal—1859-1885," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 7, no. 1 (March 1970), 25–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/001946467000700102.

imports coming from North India.[12] In 1788, the EIC helped some planters set up plantations in order to experiment with the cultivation of the product on Indian soil. They found that indigo grown in Bengal under the supervision of European planters was of the highest quality, and soon, by the end of the eighteenth century, indigo became one of the major exports from Bengal.[13]

By 1810, the indigo industry was well established in Bengal with no rivals in the world market. The production of indigo increased drastically over the years, with short slumps linked to political developments in Europe.[14] In its formative years, the industry was well-backed by the government for remitting wealth from the colony to the metropole. The dependence of the EIC on indigo for remittance can be seen clearly, as in 1795, the Company quadrupled its advances to the planters. Until 1830, the Company bought indigo from the big merchants of Calcutta for remittance. Indigo was also very important for private traders. Several agencies of Calcutta depended on the export of the crop to earn profits and transfer them to Europe. Thus, there was no way to determine the demand for indigo. Since it was inextricably linked with the fluctuating profit made by either the Company or private traders in a given year, there was rampant overproduction.[15] The industry in Bengal was a speculative enterprise. Through the years, it saw multiple periods of decline. After 1845, the decline was largely caused by falling market prices of the crop. The result was a stagnation of prices, leading to growing conflicts between planters and the peasants.[16]

Indigo was typically an unprofitable crop and its cultivation was sustained primarily through coercive practices. This exploitation persisted even when European planters bypassed small farmers, opting instead to grow indigo on their own estates using hired labour. The system of cultivating indigo through tenant peasants was especially exploitative. Planters would provide small loans—often Rs. 2 per bigha—to peasants, which were later deducted from the

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[12] B.B Chaudhari, "Eastern India II," in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, ed. Meghnad Desai, Tapan Ray Chaudhry, and Dharma Kumar, vol. 2: 1757-1970, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 315.

[13] Blair B. Kling, *The Blue Mutiny: The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal, 1859-1862* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 15-38.

[14] Chaudhari, "Eastern India II," 316.

[15] Kling, *The Blue Mutiny,* 15-38.

[16] Chaudhari, "Eastern India II," 318.

fixed and notably low purchase price of the indigo crop. When peasants failed to meet the required output, advances were withheld. Over time, the debts accrued by peasants equalled or surpassed the advances received. Importantly, planters had no interest in settling these debts; rather, they aimed to maintain indebtedness as a means of control, bolstered by their status as landlords or estate leaseholders.[17]

The system of cultivation which developed in Lower Bengal was quite unique. An indigo company had four to five factories. The factory was the basic unit of production, and it was headed by a manager or sometimes a proprietor. A manager had the power to make decisions regarding the operation of the factories owned by him, in addition to other duties like the collection of rent from the nearby leased villages. For his services, the manager received a salary of four hundred rupees per month, in addition to five percent of the profits. During the rebellion, the manager became the most loathed figure in the mofussil. The petitions that we are going to discuss mostly talk about the atrocities committed by these managers. A major reason for this may be that the managers were always European. No Indian ever held the position as manager or even his assistant. Indians who were employed in an indigo concern were grouped into three categories: administration, police and production. The administration was managed by the *diwan*, and he looked after landholding and factory accounts. Similarly, the person in charge of production was the *gomasta.* He supervised the cultivation of indigo and induced peasants to grow the crop. Finally, the most important unit of the factory was the police or the *lathiyals.*[18] They were native mercenaries responsible for the security of the factory. Through these native elements, the indigo planter coerced the local peasantry to sow the crop.

In Bengal, there were two methods by which indigo cultivation took place. One was *nijabad,* and the other was *raiyati*. In the *nijabad* system, the factory supplied the land and hired labourers to cultivate the crop. This was, however, rare compared to the *raiyati* cultivation. Since the cost of buying and managing an estate was expensive, planters favoured the system of *raiyati* cultivation. In the *raiyati* system, the land belonged to another party, which could either be a zamindar or a landholder. This was called *be-ilaka* cultivation. Additionally,

[17] Ibid., 326.

[18] Kling, *The Blue Mutiny,* 38-63.

there was also *ilaka* cultivation, in which the planter himself was the owner of the land.[19] However, before 1829, the Company restricted indigo planters from renting or purchasing any land outside their factory grounds. Thus, to meet the high demand, the planter had to advance money to peasants and induce them to grow the crop on their own land. Thus, the ryot (an umbrella term for all types of Indian peasants) was the sole bearer of risk in this venture. If, in any season, there was a crop failure, the ryot was left with a burdensome debt and no foodgrains to sustain himself. Thus, both forms of indigo cultivation—whether through tenant farming or direct plantation—were marked by coercion, displacement, and economic exploitation.

Despite these setbacks, the trade in indigo flourished partly through the help of the Company State, which provided solid legal protection for the planters, including their oppressive and extortionate methods, as long as it bore profit and filled their coffers. In the peak year of 1842, indigo accounted for 46 per cent of the total value of exports from Bengal.[20] The booming trade of indigo attracted new investors. Earlier, the big mercantile houses of Calcutta used to provide the required capital for this industry but, by 1839, indigo plantations came to be supported by the Union Bank of Calcutta. The bank gave the planter enormous amounts of capital as an advance based on yearly produce. However, the fluctuating and volatile demand for indigo led to a massive drop in 1841, leading to two large plantations going bankrupt. The Bank, with 90 per cent of its capital invested in indigo concerns, also failed by the end of 1847. By the end of 1859, the monopoly previously enjoyed by indigo as the major export commodity from Bengal was over.

New commodities such as opium and food grains emerged as the chief exports, and the share of indigo fell as low as 10 percent. This had a significant impact. The government was no longer dependent upon the indigo industry for trade and slowly began to distance itself from the planters and their oppressive methods. The actions of the English indigo planters came under intense scrutiny back in England. The misdeeds of the white planter did not help to promote the image of the ruling race. It was necessary for the British Raj to legitimise its rule at this point, and supporting the planters no longer remained an option. Hence, it is at this crucial juncture, following the turmoil

[19] Ibid.

[20] Kling, *The Blue Mutiny,* 15-38.

of the Rebellion of 1857 and the transfer of power from a private company to the British Crown, that the petitioning reached its climax. The flurry of petitioning also had a lot to do with, as Sekhar Bandhopadhyay argues, the peasants acquiring a "greater awareness of colonial policies and laws" that made them "embrace these institutions to vent their anger or redress their existing injustices."[21] Maintaining the faith of the educated middle class in the impartiality of British law and justice proved to be extremely crucial as well. Thus, if there existed in the figure of the indigo planter a bad sahib or *abhobdro* Englishman, there also existed in the figure of the Lieutenant Governor a good sahib, or a *bhodro* Englishman.[22] As Ranajit Guha famously said:

> The only way to end oppression is for the law to assert itself. It is the Government, the true custodians of the law, who alone can restore the rule of law. Hence, in a land of superstitions, the new theology of liberalism introduces yet another superstition to fit the politics, the morality and the sensibility of a colonial middle-class: corresponding to the illiterate peasant supplicating the gods against blight and drought we now have the highly literate baboo supplicating the local magistrate, the Lieutenant-Governor, the Governor-General or the Queen—the status of the member of the pantheon addressed depending on the degree of deprivation—for relief from the 'blue monkey' overrunning the countryside.[23]

The Politics of Representation: Collective Petitions from Rural Bengal

A substantial part of the official archive on the Indigo Rebellion consists of petitions written by "certain inhabitants" and "ryots" of villages from different districts. They are addressed to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, John Peter Grant, to inform him of the oppressive measures taken by the indigo planters and the subsequent denial of proper justice from the local authorities of law and order, like the district magistrate, the *darogah*, or the

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[21] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* (Orient Blackswan, 2004).

[22] Ranajit Guha, "Neel-Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 2, no. 1 (October 1974), 1–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066157408437914.

[23] Guha, "Neel-Darpan," 4.

judge. In most cases, their reply was an official proclamation by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, which directed the concerned Commissioner or Magistrate of the particular district to provide a report and justification of the incident to the Governor. However, this should not imply that all petitions were entertained or acted upon. In fact, we know from a report that the Magistrate of Jessore, between the years 1856 and 1858, received several petitions related to indigo cultivation, none of which were either preserved or talked about in detail in the official correspondence.[24]

Thus, the petitions we find in the archives are only those with a language that accommodates "proper dissent"[25] The earliest instance of petitioning to address the problems with indigo cultivation can be seen when the first Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Halliday, went on a tour of the Bengal countryside. In August 1854, Halliday was petitioned *en masse* by the landholding zamindars, mukhtars and vakils of the Nadia district on the misconduct committed by the planters. Although the petitions were dismissed by Halliday as "vague and probably not credible," it was a significant moment for the urban intelligentsia of Calcutta. *The Hindoo Patriot* reported, "They are learning to exercise the privileges of British subjects to meet together in public, discuss questions of public importance and to convey full expression of their opinions thereupon to their rulers."[26] It shows that the liberal intelligentsia of Bengal, despite being a conquered and colonised subject, still had adequate faith in the law and justice of their rulers.

Most petitions from the Indigo Rebellion were organised in a large document titled "*Selections of the Records of the Government of Bengal*." Broadly, the petitions in this record can be categorised into individual and collective formats. For the most part, the petitions were collective and titled, referring to the name of the village or *thannah to which* they belonged. Thus, we have titles of collective petitions like "Petition of certain Ryots of Jadubpore, and other Villages in Nuddea, to the Hon'ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal" or

[24] Objections of Mr. A. C. MacArthur, of Mcergunge, to the Site for the Head Quarters of the Gopalgimge Subdivision Being Fixed in the Neighbourhood of His Indigo Factory; Date 1857, 1858, and 1859" in *Selection of Records from the Government of Bengal No. XXXIII Part I: Papers Relating to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860), 56.

[25] Raman, *Document Raj,* 182.

[26] Kling, *The Blue Mutiny*, 63-84.

individual petitions like "Petition of Sreemunt Holdar and others, inhabitants of Colliriga, Thannah Handrail, Zillah Nuddea, to the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal."[27] What is interesting to note is the fact that even in the case of petitions concerned with individual matters, there is a sense of the collective. The petitioners used the voice of the collective in their appeal for justice from the Government. For our study, we will analyse one such petition from the Indigo Rebellion in detail.

The petition in question is titled "From the Inhabitants of Chur Ramnaggur to the Honourable J.P Grant, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, dated Moorshedabad, Chur Ramnuggur, 7 January 1860." It talks about a case of land dispute between the Messrs Watson and Company planters and the "inhabitants" of Chur Ramnuggar. The aforementioned word *chur* or *char* before the name of the village is the particular type of land in which indigo was cultivated. The *char* land was formed by the sediment deposited on riverbanks and was appropriate for the *nijabadi* type cultivation of the crop. Thus, this particular petition has a dispute quite unlike the typical disputes that characterised the Indigo Rebellion. Here, the problem was not the indigo planter's extraction of indigo from the ryot but rather his encroachment on land. This will become important later when we examine the presence of a subaltern voice.

Like their counterparts from the same period, the language and format of this petition are shaped by colonial legalities. It is moulded by the civility and submission that the colonial State demanded from its colonised subjects:

> Honoured Sir,
> We, the undersigned, most humbly beg, for the inhabitants of Chur Ramnuggur, to submit before your Honor a statement of our grievances given in, with some details below, and earnestly hope for redress through the gracious interference of your Honor.[28]

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[27] *Selection of Records from the Government of Bengal No. XXXIII Part I: Papers Relating to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860), 6.

[28] "From the Inhabitants of Chur Ramnaggur to the Honourable J.P Grant, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Dated Moorshedabad, Chur Ramnuggur, 7 January 1860," in *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal No. XXXIII Part I: Papers Relating to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal,* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860), 335-345.

The petition is in the form of a letter. It begins by describing the "comparative ease and happiness" the village's inhabitants enjoyed under its former leaseholder Sheebsoondree Dasee. However, conditions were not so pleasant after Messrs Watson & Co., a large indigo planting concern, got the village as an *ijara* lease from the collector of Murshidabad. It is said that despite protests from the villagers, the land was granted and the managers, rather than "facilitate the business of their trade," wreaked vengeance on Sheebsoondree and the helpless ryots. The letter goes on to describe the particular instances of oppression committed by the indigo planters of the factory. They include forging the contract of a "poor illiterate" peasant called Kishun Salie and lodging a case against him when he refused to cultivate indigo. The planter lodged a civil suit against him, leading to his arrest and imprisonment. The petition also complains about the illegal sowing of indigo in lands sown with other crops and how the planter, with the help of the magistrate, has coerced the ryots to sow the indigo crop. It mentions how the police *darogah*, a supposed "good man," did not help the planter, making the *lathiyals* of the factory attack and vandalise the police *thannah*.

Finally, the petition mentions a case where a ryot named Shahamut Sekh was shot in the leg by the planter's men when he refused to grow the crop. The petition thus tries to present a case for the village residents of Chur Ramnugar by citing discrete incidents connected to exploitation by the indigo planters. The petition also shows a very clear understanding of colonial subjecthood. It frames grievances in such a way that tempts the reader to sympathise with the "helpless ryots" against the "tyranny" of the white planter: "...by tyrannizing over the indigent and helpless ryots, many of whom seeing no other hope have since found safety in flight.."[29]

It appears that the petitioner's complaints are mostly against the decisions of the Magistrate and other Government officials. Despite this, the petitioner is careful not to lay blame on them as he does against the planters. The petitioner was aware of the fact that the Magistrate was an extension of the State and, hence, was very careful in his wording. Thus, we have:

[29] Ibid.

> ...the magistrate, agreeably to the instructions of his superior, sentenced the prisoner to imprisonment and similarly disposed of the rest. Your Honor is well aware how easy it is to fabricate such documents, and to torment the poor illiterate peasantry of a village; the whole fraud will come to light on an inspection of the records of the case. [30]

Similarly, the petition further notes:

> ...and in this act the Government officials, whether consciously or not we will not aver, have lent their assisting hand.[31]

As the paragraphs show, in their protest against the Magistrate, the petitioner put the onus on the indigo planter for fabricating the document, which only misled the Magistrate in dispensing proper justice. It also opens up enough room for interpreting the Government official's action(s) as "unconscious".

If we follow the paper trail left behind by the petition, we come across some interesting findings. First, when the petition is received by the Secretary of the Governor, he notices that the signatures of the petitioners are all in the same handwriting. Noticing such consistency, he directed the Magistrate and Collector of Murshidabad, W Morris Beaufort, to look into the matter. Further, Beaufort directs his assistant, Mr Kean, to investigate the case on the spot and report his findings to the Office of the Governor. From Kean's report we get to know that the land in dispute belonged to Gour Soondur Shaha. After his death, it was transferred to his widowed wife, Sheebsoondree. It is mentioned that the indigo company Messrs. Watson & Co. outbid the Shaha's widow, by paying an additional 300 rupees. However, in the autumn of 1859, the deceased farmer's relative, Bejaikisto Shaha, incited the peasants not to take advances for sowing indigo. The disturbance escalated from that point onwards, and the peasants, under the leadership of Bejaikisto refused to fulfil their contracts. We find from the later portions of his report that the petition was probably written by an agent of his in Berhampore. Kean thus concludes his report by saying:

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

> I consider there is no doubt whatever that the ryots never signed the petition; that it was never written in their presence, and that they never saw it; on the contrary, I think it is most evident that it was really written by the other party, who is said in the petition "to have fallen out with deadly hatred against Messrs. Watson and Co." No doubt that after the petition had been written and sent, a few of the ryots were told that such a petition had been forwarded, and that their names had been affixed thereto.[32]

While it may be true that the local peasants may never have had any part in drafting or signing the petition, it cannot be dismissed that there was a presence of a network of solidarity amongst the villagers for the petitioners. So, while Kean goes to the village asking for the identity of the person who drafted the petition, he gets no positive reply from anyone. Similarly, when he confronts the peasants about their signatures or marks, (in case they were illiterate) on the petition, most of them deny having anything to do with it. Such an action is not unprecedented in a situation where a high-ranking official goes to a small village to investigate a case. It is most likely that most of the responses were given out of apprehension of retaliation from the State. However, what becomes more important is the question of voice. Does the petition voice the subaltern peasant? Or does it, like Kean's comments, voice the interest of the former landlord only to get back the lease? The answer is complex and depends on how we approach it. If one goes by what Ranajit Guha has to say, then it is not usual to see the clashing class interests of the landlord and the peasant. In his critique of the existing historiography of the rebellion, Guha says:

> The emphasis has thus been laid on the unity of interest between the village poor and their native exploiters against a common, foreign enemy. This has helped to mask the truth about two important aspects of the upper-class participation in this struggle—first, about the opportunism of the landed magnates and the fierce contest between

[32] "From W. Morris Beaufort, Esq., Officiating Magistrate and Collector of Moorshedabad, to the Commissioner of the Rajshahie Division, Beauleah (No 203), Dated Berhampore, 17 March 1860," in *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal No. XXXIII Part I: Papers Relating to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal,* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860), 338.

> them and the peasantry for the initiative of the struggle against the planters, and secondly, about the feebleness and defeatism displayed by the people 'of inter- mediate means,' that is, the rich peasants and the lesser landlords.[33]

The family of Bejaikisto and Gour Soondur Saha can be associated with this group of lesser landlords that Guha mentions. The petition, which was drafted by the agent of the landlord, may seemingly plead for the case of the peasants, but the particular manner in which it is framed highlights, nonetheless, that its main aim is to get back the lease from the Government. Here, the appropriation of the peasant's voice is not a rare phenomenon because, throughout many similar petitions in the archive, we see the zamindars, talukdars, and other landed gentry rally for the plight of the poor peasants for reclaiming their own lands lost to Indigo planters or other zamindars who outbid them. Hence, the petition which, at first glance, seems to hold the collective voice and solidarity of peasants against the oppression of the zamindar and planter, on closer inspection turns out to be a dispute between the landlord and the planter.

Conclusion

The language used by the petitioner shows the trend of prevalent norms seen in colonial petitions. Like other petitions, it was framed in a deferential yet persuasive tone, addressing colonial officials with honorifics and emphasizing loyalty to the British administration. This was a strategic choice to ensure that grievances were taken seriously rather than dismissed as rebellious. It uses legal and bureaucratic language to fit within the framework of British legalism. In its narrative structure, it used testimonies and anecdotes of the helpless ryot to evoke sympathy. Unlike petitions coming from the elite, it used the voice of the collective to reinforce legitimacy of its appeal. In its language, we find the British portrayed as potential protectors against corrupt and oppressive planters, a tactic often used to avoid direct condemnation of colonial rule and yet show dissent. What turns out to be an interesting observation is the fact that the petition was written by a scribe employed by the landlord. The scribe must have translated grievances into a format

[33] Guha, "Neel Darpan," 17.

recognisable to colonial officials, altering the tone and content in the process and thus giving rise to the first level of mediation.

Navigating through the complex twists and turns of the petition, we uncover several important findings that were not evident on the surface level. In this process, both the methods of "reading against" and "along the grain" come to be useful for certain reasons. Firstly, while reading along the grain, we must ask why the petition exists in the first place. A plausible reason is that the Indigo revolt happened at a crucial juncture in India's history. Just a couple of years after the British crown took over the governance of the East India Company's possessions following the Revolt of 1857, the breakout of another serious peasant insurgency was a serious setback for the Empire. Moreover, the actions of the non-official planter community were a source of constant anxiety for the colonial state, which operated on the basis of racial and civilisational superiority over the colonised.[34] Thus, acts of violence and defiance of law were a threat to the rule of law, which was used to justify conquest.

An increasing number of complaints over the oppressive system under which indigo was cultivated began to surface in official circles of the government through petitions like the one we have examined above. While the actual rebellion lasted for quite a short while in the countryside, it evoked the sentiments of the Bengali *bhadralok,* who looked at the British crown with hope for justice. In such a situation, the government appointed the Indigo Commission to investigate the matter. Much of what is preserved in the archive on the Indigo Rebellion is thus a paper trail of this Commission. As Ann Stoler argues, colonial commissions are stories that states tell to themselves. By organising knowledge and creating categories, these commissions were creating history in the literal sense.[35] Thus, much of what we know about indigo cultivation in Bengal comes from the Report of the Indigo Commission which was, and is still, used as a primary source by historians. Thus, the petition that we read in this essay, along with numerous others blaming the ill conduct of the white planter, would not have existed in

[34] Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[35] Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 104.

the first place if it had not been recorded as evidence by the Indigo Commission.

Secondly, reading against the grain to extract the subaltern voice shows us how it is mediated through layers of State and elite interest. Here we are reminded of Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak for themselves unless they are spoken for. The search for a pure and unmediated subaltern voice and consciousness in the archive, no matter how appealing to the historian, turns out to be an exercise of speaking on behalf of others, which can sometimes silence them further.[36] We are also faced with the problematic nature of the subaltern as a category in itself. The subaltern as a broad social category is not dependent on class, caste, or gender, but rather on its relation of subordination to the elite. It is also historical and depends on a particular context. Hence, as Guha himself says, an impoverished landlord can also be the possessor of a subaltern voice. If that is the case, then the petitioner, the landlord, can also be a subaltern subject, since he is subordinate to the colonial State and the white planter. This shows us the ambiguity of the term subaltern and the problem of using a relational category that does not account for class. In a way, the petition gives voice to one subaltern while silencing another.

Thus, a nuanced engagement with the colonial archive requires an awareness of the discourse surrounding it. A petition, which may initially appear as a collective plea from oppressed peasants, can, upon closer examination, reveal itself as a strategic instrument of landlords seeking to reclaim their rights and property. Given the multiple layers of mediation, appropriation, and vested interests that shape archival documents, studying petitions demands careful contextualisation and inquiry beyond the text itself. As this essay has demonstrated, a critical reading of such sources allows us to navigate the complexities of colonial power and subaltern agency with greater depth and precision.

[36] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "'Can the Subaltern Speak?'," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed Rosalind C. Morris (Columbia University Press, 2010), 21–78. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/morr14384.5.

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Documenting Non-Visits to Archives

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This research article stems from methodological questions related to my doctoral study, based heavily on textual sources. It documents my non-visits to archives, or each instance wherein I make use of rare, primary documents that are either already housed or ought to be preserved in archival spaces, without actually visiting one. The idea is to understand what necessitated or facilitated these non-visits to conventional archival spaces, each of which leads one to the alternate places from where these texts have been accessed. The article highlights the human processes associated with arranging and accessing archival spaces, the silences therein, and also discusses the role of digital archives in facilitating my non-visits. It thus explores the ever-expanding notions of the archive and its departure from the conventional physical structure housing State records to newer imaginations of repositories of pasts preserved in texts.

Keywords: Archive, Sankaradeva, *Satra*, digital archive.

Introduction

This article is born out of my ongoing doctoral research experience. My work entails understanding the recollection of pre-modern South Asian Bhakti saint-poets in late 19th and early 20th century colonial India through the resurgence of interest around a figure called Sankaradeva in the Brahmaputra Valley. Sankaradeva fits into the mould of pre-modern Bhakti saints of South

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Asia, who propagated a simple method of venerating a single Godhead (Vishnu of the Hindu pantheon in Sankaradeva's case) through verses and prayers composed in vernacular languages, without indulging in complicated and expensive ritual practices. Sankaradeva was born sometime in the late 15th century and gained popularity in the 16th-century Brahmaputra Valley. My research engages with the context of the recollection of Sankaradeva in the 20th century, leading to the formation of a new organisation named Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha (which can be roughly translated as the Saint Sankaradeva Association). The work borrows from the conceptual frameworks of 'public memory' as forwarded by Novetzke among several others. According to Novetzke, the entanglement of 'history' and 'memory' creates the recollection of pre-modern saints in India. The 'history' element comes from scholars who undertake careful examination and analysis of data, whereas the 'memory' part of it is sourced from devotees who narrate stories with a strong emotional quotient passed on through generations.[1] This points towards the volatility of 'public memory' - the propensity of people's collective remembering of something being refashioned with the requirements of the time. My research tends to seek the socio-political questions that made Sankaradeva relevant in the 20th-century Brahmaputra Valley, and the anachronism involved in evaluating, imagining, and sustaining his personality.

In this article, the methodology I employ is more relevant than the topic of my research, as I intend to focus on the processes of locating archival texts and documents that serve as crucial primary sources in my study. I must, at the outset, provide a disclaimer that there is no innovation in this regard. I use the old techniques of studying texts and uncovering whatever is possible while questioning the silences. The only aspect that may be considered noteworthy to some degree is the considerable diversity of texts that I deal with. Pre-modern compositions attributed to Sankaradeva, dating back to the 16th century (including verses, plays, and translations and adaptations of Sanskrit texts), compositions of his disciples who subsequently headed the spiritual path paved by him, his reverential biographies, chronicles of the Ahom dynasty ruling over parts of pre-colonial Brahmaputra Valley, colonial accounts describing the region and its people, Census Reports, and articles in

[1] Christian Lee Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 70-72.

leading periodicals among others - all of these have been classified as primary sources. These have been delved into with the aim of unearthing references to Sankaradeva or his *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*.

The term *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* indicates the process of monotheistic initiation into the fold of Vishnu worship through the singing of *naam* or verses in praise of the God. In a way, I am looking for Sankaradeva in these texts- what of him has been written about, how, and in what context. For a study based almost entirely on textual sources, save the last chapter, which is designed to involve ethnographic work, it is interesting that I have hardly visited any form of physical archival spaces. My interest in writing this article emerged from a sense of guilt that accompanied these non-visits to archives as a student of history. However, this must never be equated with not accessing what are perceived to be archival documents, which I have consistently accessed and examined. Do these non-visits make my research less serious, or make it seem inadequate in terms of methodological effort? We may circle back to this concern later in the article, but at the outset, it is important that I qualify how I intend to use the term non-visit—to refer to each instance where I access an archival document without visiting a physical space such as the State Archive or the National Archive.

Terms such as archive and archival documents cannot be used in passing without qualifying the sense in which they have been employed. This necessitates a brief recapitulation of the different ways in which scholars have defined and broadened the idea of an archive over the years. The Greek word *arkheion* is the etymological ancestor of the word 'archive,' indicating a magistrate's or governor's residence. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the word was used to refer to a physical structure where a large range of documents, especially royal charters and deeds were stored. Gradually, an archive was distinguished from a library by associating it particularly with governments, whereas a library was perceived as significant for academic materials. Alexandra Walsham highlights the redundancy of such a categorisation, given that both libraries and archives often cross this assumed boundary. Archives may contain information in a government building but may include a varied repository of documents, not always pertinent to governance or the state. Robert Cotton's library, Walsham writes, which was publicly accessible,

contained state-associated materials.[2] Archive is a complex concept that eludes easy definition. Eventually, it marked a departure from the conventional idea of a government repository alone and included diversified materials, preserved for posterity. Peter Lester uses the term archive in two ways - first, 'documented and recorded information about the past,' and second, 'a building or repository where these records are kept.'[3]

As much as by what is included, archives are also defined by what is missing in them. Not every document that reaches the archivist makes its way into the archive. Many are not deemed essential enough to be preserved, especially given the physical limitations of space in archive buildings. Several documents are sifted out, particularly because of their content not being aligned with the sensibilities of those in power who control the archives. Most importantly, there are numerous facets of the past that were never documented in the first place. Moss and Thomas quote Trouillot, who attributed the creation of silences in the archives to four crucial junctions - 'the moment of fact creation,' essentially the time when the source documents and records are being written, 'the moment of fact assembly,' whereby the records are sorted and arranged in the archives, the moment of fact retrieval,' wherein researchers access these records, and finally, the 'moment of retrospective significance,' wherein these are interpreted and written as history.[4]

Archives have moved beyond the static idea of housing documents, and are increasingly viewed as dynamic and subjective spaces, intermediated by archivists. The primary functions of archives —'acquisition, arrangement, processing, and description,' which were once viewed as 'impartial storing activities' are now seen as people-handled processes that are products of the

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[2] Alexandra Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive: Record Keeping in Early Modern Europe," *Past and Present* 230, no. 11 (November, 2016), 14-15, http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtw033.

[3] The terms record, documents, and archive are not synonymous, with small degrees of difference. Nevertheless, Lester qualifies that he uses them "interchangeably." See Peter Lester, *Exhibiting the Archive: Space Encounter and Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 22-24.

[4] Michael Moss and David Thomas ed., *Archival Silences: Missing, Lost and Uncreated Archives* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 2-3.

socio-political contexts in which they are located.[5] The once perceived passive role of the archivist as a guardian of these spaces, and 'handmaiden of the historian,' has also undergone significant changes.[6] There is an increasing acknowledgement of the archivist's role as an active agent in creating these archives, sorting the historical materials, and deciding what makes its way into the archive in the first place. The archivist is seen as a 'facilitator,' and even an 'activist' with a focus on social justice. They negotiate with the power structures that determine 'record-keeping systems.'[7]

In my study, each non-visit stemmed from situational requirements, which I have outlined in the three sections of the paper before the concluding paragraphs. The first part deals with locating rare manuscripts pertaining to Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism, comprising the first set of primary sources for my study. These are not preserved in the State archives but in spiritual centres of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* called *Satra*s. Thus, a non-visit in this context does not signify not visiting the spaces where the primary texts are located; instead, it implies the non-requirement of visiting conventional archives due to the religious nature of the sources, which in turn determines their location. In the second section, I discuss how I accessed the next set of primary sources relevant to my research, comprising accounts and documents pertaining to the Brahmaputra Valley, produced by colonial officials. This section provides a glimpse of the journey of a few such texts that have travelled through time and across continents before being made available to the public today via digital media. Thus, digital accessibility of these texts facilitated non-visits to the physical, conventional archives during my study.

The third section talks about what is unavailable across conventional and non-conventional archives that I engage with, thus creating a need to look beyond and locate materials in alternative spaces. These are predominantly the voices of people of the Brahmaputra Valley in the early 20th century, and their assessment of the contemporary situation they were placed in, constituting the third type of primary sources for my research. Assamese periodicals published from the 19th century onwards hosted intense debates on various social

[5] Iva Lučić, "Making Sense of the Archive," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70, no. 4, (January 2023), 573-574, https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2022-0069.

[6] Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 1-2.

[7] Lester, *Exhibiting the Archive*, 28-30.

matters. However, the issues of these old periodicals were not preserved in any designated space. It was the individual and group efforts to compile, edit, and publish volumes of such unpreserved sources that proved instrumental in ensuring that these were not lost in time. Moreover, there are voices that had never been documented in the first place, thereby completely obliterating the process of preserving them in archives. The third section also particularly highlights the absence of female voices in the sources that I engage with. In such scenarios, one is required to move beyond textual sources and begin looking for information and insights into the lived experiences of the people. Thus, with such backgrounds, non-visits are not a matter of choice that I make; rather, they become a necessity, for accessing sources that are not to be found in the archives.

To answer the question raised earlier, non-visits, therefore, are not a methodological lapse in my research, nor do they indicate a lack of seriousness. These are situational requirements that allowed me to access a range of different kinds of primary sources for my study and thus, fill the gaps in the conventional archives. Moreover, what I define as non-visits is not limited to this particular research and may be applicable across studies, in any such situation wherein sources are preserved in alternate spaces, or may have moved beyond the realm of physical spaces into the digital sphere, or were not preserved at all. I, nevertheless, do not intend to diminish the significance of archives. On the contrary, through the description of the events of non-visits, I wish to highlight the ways in which the idea of archives has transcended the conventional spaces that it had been associated with for long.

In the first section, the idea of archives shifts from conventional, state-sponsored, physical infrastructures, to local initiatives of spiritual centres of the *Satra*s, wherein rare manuscripts were preserved in specifically designated places. The second section discusses the aspect of digital archives, their associated convenience, and concerns. The third finally talks about looking for hitherto unpreserved sources, and thereby creating one's own repository of materials and lived experiences. This article does not intend to be a work of social or cultural history. Rather, it highlights the methodological possibilities of dealing with archival documents and the spaces where these may be located, other than the physical confines of conventional archives.

Availing Non-Visits to *Satra* Archives

Coming back to my research, which deals with a range of pre-colonial texts, my first concern was to understand the nature of these sources and thereafter identify the possible places to locate them. As a student of history, my first instinct was to look towards the archive. The Assam State Archive in Guwahati has a colonial legacy that can be traced to the Records Branch that was created in 1874 in the Chief Commissionership of Assam. In 1980, the State Archives Organisation was set up and attached to the General Administration Department, and in 1996 it officially became a Directorate. Today, it is under the Secretariat Administration Department and contains a host of materials from the 1770s onwards, primarily official correspondences, Census Reports, Acts, Assembly debates, and the like.[8] The pre-colonial, unsurprisingly, is largely absent in a space that was created out of a necessity to maintain colonial records.

My first set of primary sources consists of pre-colonial texts attributed to, and composed on, Sankaradeva and his *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. These include, among others, compilations of verses, translations and adaptations of the *Bhagawata Purana*, one-act plays or *Ankiya Naat*s, songs, and the like authored by Sankaradeva and his disciples. Naturally, the State Archives did not host such pre-modern texts that had no tangible association with colonial governance. Thus, a search in the State Archive did not yield many results. Some of these, however, have survived as manuscripts, written predominantly on the barks of *Sanchi* or Agar trees, preserved in the *Satra*s, institutions where the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* is performed. *Sanchi* bark was durable and suitable for writing. Folios of these were prepared for Sankaradeva and the later *guru*s of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* to render a written form to their compositions. Many were also illustrated, portraying scenes from ancient Sanskrit texts that helped propagate *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* among the people. Created and preserved by *Satra*s, the process became popular and came to be known as the *Satriya* style of manuscript-making.[9] Copies of older manuscripts were produced in a

[8] "Our History," *Assam Archives*, accessed December 3, 2024, https://archives.assam.gov.in/.

[9] Irfan Laskar and Shahida Ansari, "Illustrated Manuscripts at Auniati Satra of Majuli Island, Assam," *Heritage Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 9 (2021-2022), 1138-

similar fashion at the of onset of damage. The only Sanskrit text attributed to Sankaradeva, *Bhakti Ratnakara,* was originally in the custody of a *Satra* at a place called Barpeta. This was later copied and preserved in the Kamalabari *Satra* located in the river island of Majuli.[10] Thus, in the *Satra* storehouses—some maintained and some dilapidated—*Sanchi Puthi*s or booklets, remain. Many of these were retrieved and published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS). This department, too, had its roots in colonial Assam, being established in 1928 with the primary aim of the collection of rare manuscripts.[11] In 1940, Birinchi Kumar Barua, a Professor of Assamese at Gauhati University and the Deputy Director of DHAS, published a compilation of sixteen plays, attributed to Sankaradeva and his later *guru*s, Madhavadeva and Gopaladeva. In the preface to the first edition, B. K. Barua expressed his gratitude to the *Satradhikar*s, or heads of three of the most prominent *Satra*s of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam—Auniati, Dakshinpaat and Kamalabari—for granting him access to some of the manuscripts.[12]

The *Satra*s, which are spaces for the practice and propagation of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* headed by *Satradhikara*s, consist primarily of a large prayer hall, or *Naamghar,* where devotees gather and sing verses in the name of God. At one end of the *Naamghar* is the *Manikut,* or sanctum-sanctorum, where usually a holy text is placed, and outside this space are the residential units of monks.[13] The *Satra*s are therefore sites of public performance of devotion, and yet, they may also be perceived as significant archives containing pre-colonial manuscripts. *Satras,* as archives, can be seen engaging in decisions regarding the selection of texts and the formats of preservation. Far from the idea of archives as passive entities, *Satra*s represent spaces that have been specifically preserving documents which help enhance a certain form of veneration. Simultaneously, *Satra*s are also considered custodians of a process and style of

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1139. https://www.heritageuniversityofkerala.com/CurrentIssue.aspx?VID=9, accessed December 1, 2025.

[10] Surjya Hazarika ed., *Srimanta Sankaradeva Bakyamrit* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir, 2014), 0.40-0.49.

[11] "History," *Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies*, accessed December 4, 2024, https://dhas.assam.gov.in/.

[12] Birinchi Kumar Barua ed., *Ankiya Naat: Or a Compilation of Sixteen Dramas Written by Mahapurush Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Gopaladeva* (Guwahati: Government of Assam, 1954), v.

[13] Satyendra Nath Sarma, *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam,* (Guwahati: Guwahati University Press, 2016), 100-101.

writing that has now slipped into oblivion. Among the texts preserved in the *Satra*s are the *Satria Buranji*s, which are chronological records that include stories of the origins of the *Satra*s, a list of *Satradhikara*s, and other relevant details. These were regularly revised and updated. Additionally, more prominent *guru*s had separate biographical accounts written by disciples, known as *Charita Puthi*s.[14]

On the riverine island of Majuli, home to some of the most well-known *Satra*s in Assam, various *Satra*s have manuscripts written on barks of *Sanchi* trees. *Uttar Kamalabari Satra*, *Elengi Narasingha Satra*, *Auniati Satra*, *Samaguri Satra* and *Bhogpur Satra* are only a few names to take. Most of these *Satra*s keep the regularly used manuscripts in the prayer hall, or N*aamghar*, where the *bhakat*s initiated into *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* read them during prayers. These individuals, specifically known as *pathak*s or readers, know how to read these texts, usually written in archaic Assamese or *Brajawali* languages. Other manuscripts which are not used daily are preserved in the storehouses. *Satra*s that are maintained by certain families through the years, such as the *Samaguri Satra*, keep these manuscripts in personal possession and pass these on across generations. Usually, the head of the *Satra,* or someone whom he entrusts the responsibility, oversees the preservation of these manuscripts and decides who may be granted access.

On one of my visits to the island, where I got a chance to meet and interact with some of the *bhakat*s and *Satradhikar*s, I tried to understand more about the manuscripts preserved therein. When asked whether women could view and read these texts, most *Satra*s, except a few like the *Auniati Satra* who outrightly refused, responded by saying that no one has ever made such a request, and thus no one has been granted access. Nevertheless, there is no given rule that they cannot read. Men from different castes can and have been given access to these manuscripts in most of the *Satra*s, however, they need to take the required prior permissions, wear traditional clothes, and approach with a devotional mind to read. Thus, while access to these texts is possible, there are specific procedures in different *Satra*s that need to be navigated first. For

[14] Hemachandra Goswami, *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta on Behalf of the Government of Assam, 1930), xxi-xxii. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.68268/mode/2up?view=theater, accessed December 11, 2024.

women, the process may be more onerous, as many of the *Satra*s in Majuli claim that no one has attempted it before.

In 1930, DHAS published a *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts,* including those collected from *Satra*s. The catalogue detailed the content of the manuscripts and the places where they can be found, among other information. Numerous *Sanchipaat puthis* found in different *Satra*s were catalogued here. Interestingly, texts attributed to Sankaradeva, copied on folios much after his demise were also in the possession of individuals who eventually presented those to the compilers of the catalogue. For instance, a *Sanchipaat Puthi* containing Sankaradeva's composition *Anadipatan* (which consists of verses of the *Bhagawata* rendered into Assamese), copied in 1686, was with a certain Baputiran Sarma Saykia, who deposited the text in the library of the Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti.[15]

With details of the physical appearance of the manuscripts, the approximate idea of the time of composition of the content, and that of copying by the scribe, the *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*, was a remarkable step in facilitating research, particularly on pre-colonial manuscripts. One does not need to move from one *Satra* to the other *in order* to get an idea of the types of manuscripts these spaces have been custodians of. Furthermore, the availability of this catalogue online signals convenience, and it is also free to browse. It ensures the presence and accessibility of information on the manuscripts in one dedicated space, without needing to visit the *Satra* archives unless a physical inspection of these manuscripts is essentially mandated by a

[15] Ibid., 1-10. The Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti or Assam Research Society was another colonial era organisation that was established in 1912 with the efforts of people like Sir Archdale Earle, Maharaja of Koch Behar - Narayan Bhupa Bahadur, Sir Edward Gait and others. The self-declared primary objective of the Society was to *'carry on researches in matters relating to history, archaeology, ethnography etc., all that usually comes under the purview of a Research Society, and to collect books, manuscripts, coins, copper-plates, statues, carved stones- etc., i. e. the things that should find place in a library and museum of such society.'* This Society had preserved a few original and also transcribed manuscripts where the original could not be acquired, which included texts pertaining to the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. Thus, while publishing the descriptive catalogue in 1930, these manuscripts were consulted and referred to. See S.K. Bhuyan, *Reports and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anushandhan Samiti or The Assam Research Society* (Guwahati: KAS Publication, 1927), 1-10.

https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.30157/page/n5/mode/2up, accessed December 12, 2024.

particular study. Moreover, the digitisation of this catalogue allows researchers to access its contents in its entirety without having to visit even the DHAS in person. Thus, there are multiple layers of archiving at play here for the same manuscripts that facilitate a researcher like me, who primarily requires information on the types of texts available and their structure, and not necessarily their content, to avail a non-visit to a physical archival space. Moreover, publications of DHAS like B. K. Barua's compilation of sixteen one-act plays or *Ankiya Naat*s attributed to Sankaradeva and later *guru*s, which too have also been digitised, handle the question of access to the content of some of these manuscripts. This compilation, in particular, serves as a primary source for my research, as it contains the scripts of these pre-colonial plays as found in the manuscripts, neither abridged nor paraphrased.[16]

Texts Travel

My next set of primary sources comprises documents written by colonial officials about the Brahmaputra Valley. Jean Baptiste-Chevalier was one of the first colonial (French) officials who travelled into and wrote about the region. His memoirs and journals, written in the 18th century, had to wait till 2008 to be printed, when the manuscripts were finally compiled and published. Chevalier, a Frenchman, travelled through the Brahmaputra Valley in the second half of the 18th century, during which he meticulously maintained journals. He eventually wrote a memoir of his experiences, gathering materials from different journal entries. These were donated to the Bibliotheque de l' lnstitut in Paris in 1926, along with other documents of the Chevalier family.[17] In the early 2000s, a French researcher Jean Delouche, who knew about these manuscripts, passed the information to Caroline Dutta-Baruah, a researcher from Normandy. Caroline happened to be married to Bhaskar Dutta-Baruah, son of the famous Dutta-Baruah family that contributed immensely to the intellectual sphere of the Brahmaputra Valley through its writing and publishing ventures after the arrival of print technology in colonial Assam in

[16] Barua, *Ankiya Naat.*

[17] Jean Baptiste Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean Baptiste Chevalier In Eastern India (1752-1765)*; *Historical Memoir and Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet,* Translated by Deloche and Dutta-Baruah (Guwahati: LBS Publication, 2020), 1-4,
https://archive.org/details/the-adventures-of-jean-baptiste-chevalier-in-eastern-india-1752-1765/page/n3/mode/2up?view=theater, accessed on December 9, 2024.

the early 20th century. This family owns the landmark Lawyers Book Stall, established in the 1940s, and has published some of the most prominent books on Assam. This association with the region likely ignited Caroline's interest in the manuscripts.

Delouche and Caroline carefully studied, compiled and translated the manuscripts from old French to English. The manuscripts were compared, and tallied with each other to meaningfully restore the content in places where they had been damaged.[18] Finally, these were printed in 2008, thus, bringing in a lost voice from the past among the colonial accounts of Assam. However, since it is protected by copyright rules, the complete text of this book has not made its way to the digital archives for free access. The manuscripts of Chevalier were recovered from an archival space in Paris, compiled, rearranged, and printed, giving those centuries-old documents a new lease of life. The printed version of this is now available and must have already made its way into libraries, allowing easy access to researchers. It is also available online, even though partially, but still gives a fair idea of what the complete text is like.

John Peter Wade, an English physician, who travelled to the Brahmaputra Valley in the late 18th century, before the area was included in the British dominion, found two texts chronicling the past of the region—one in the language of the Ahoms and one in a form of pre-modern Assamese. He translated the latter and presented it to a certain Col. Kirkpatric. The text, over time, found itself in the India Office Library. It was never printed, and thus only a single copy of the manuscript was preserved there. In the early 1920s, Benudhar Sharma found a clue to this text, after coming across a reference to J. P. Wade and his writing on the Brahmaputra Valley in another book. Sharma wrote to the India Office Library in London, hoping that he would find this particular book of Wade's there. The India Office in return informed him that they did, in fact, possess a manuscript by J. P. Wade named *History of Assam*, which they would allow him to borrow after acquiring the required permissions. To Sharma's surprise, the copy he received was actually a

[18] Special Correspondent, "The Norman Connection: Assam's French Daughter-in-law Restores 18th Century Tome," *The Telegraph Online,* March 11, 2008, https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/the-norman-connection-assam-s-french-daughter-in-law-restores-18th-century-tome/cid/607472, accessed on December 9, 2024.

translation of a local chronicle by Wade, and not a history written by him. In the late 1920s, Sharma edited and ensured that the book appeared in print. Today, the entire text is available online for free browsing.

Such texts are remarkably old and thus have moved out of the copyright restrictions into the 'public domain' according to Indian copyright rules. The journey of this text and the layers of mediation that it has accumulated over the centuries would probably merit a separate article. It was a vernacular text discovered by Wade, who translated it into English, creating the first layer at which it was mediated. Since we do not have much information on or access to the chronicle that he translated, there is a lack of clarity regarding the thematic and linguistic proximity of the translation to the original. Benudhar Sharma talks about names being misspelt and altered in the translation, and also writes that while sticking to the original pattern of writing, he has provided additional notes and redistributed Wade's text into new chapters in the printed version. This is the second level of mediation, which is the version that finally reaches us. It cannot be ascertained whether the changes made by Sharma brought the text closer to or took it farther from the original chronicle, but it most definitely marks a journey of the text.

The chronicle, not in its original physical form but in essence, also made a spatial journey from the Brahmaputra Valley to London and back. The new edited and printed version of the text in the 1920s must have been sold in markets and made its way into libraries. The copy referred to here was accessed from the Birchandra State Central Library of Tripura and digitised in 2015 by the Digital Library of India. I accessed this from 'archive.org' which hosts a large number of free digital sources. To reach the readers, the content of this text has made a long expedition, in slowly changing forms and has moved in and out of physical archival spaces, be it the India Office Library in London or the Birchandra Library in Tripura, until it found its space in the intangible sphere of the digital archives.[19]

[19] John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam,* edited by Benudhar Sharma (North Lakhimpur: R. Sharma, Madhupur Tea Estate, 1927), vii-xv. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.125418/page/n15/mode/2up?view=theater, accessed on December 15, 2024.

The other colonial sources, including the Census reports, are all easily accessible online, which completely obliterates the need to visit the physical archives. Digital archives enhance accessibility to texts substantially. A few fellow research scholars and others who were involved with research in the recent past have highlighted in my discussions with them the immense advantages of digital repositories. The emphasis was primarily on the aspect of financial benefits of the digital medium in terms of curtailing travel costs, especially when texts are located in areas that are far from where the researchers are based. Especially in situations such as that created by the pandemic, where travel becomes difficult, digital sources are of utmost significance. Further, tools like keyword search allow ease of the process of hunting for sources and prove instrumental in saving the researchers' time.[20] However, this article is far from being a eulogy for digitisation.

Digital archives also carry the same set of concerns as conventional physical archives, including the maintenance of infrastructure for preserving the archival documents. While they may not be physically present, the process of creating digital archives is not simply uploading digitised analogue records on a social media platform or website, Carbajal and Caswell write. There are concerns about maintaining these records across spatial and temporal limits, creating a strong base of metadata to ensure accessibility and the purpose with which these records are primarily created. These activities, in the first place, require physical 'infrastructure and labour.'[21] Thus, the creation, maintenance and sustenance of digital archives do not constitute a digital activity in itself and require buildings and people to make it possible. Besides, the digitisation of analogue records is also a matter of discretion of the people involved, similar to the role of the archivist, who actively influences the materials that are found in the archive.[22] Hence, any archive, by virtue of it being digital, does not automatically ensure a more democratic or access-friendly form of recordkeeping, as it too involves a process of selection and marginalisation of records, as in the case of physical archives.

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[20] Telephonic Conversations and communication via Google Forms with Shubhojeet Dey, Shalom Gauri, Kartika Menon, Sonal Sharma and Barsha Misra in September 2024.

[21] Itza A. Carbajal and Michelle Caswell, "Critical Digital Archives: A Review from Archival Studies," *American Journal of Ophthalmology* 126, no.3 (2021), 1105. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhab359, accessed on December 22, 2024.

[22] Ibid., 1101-1104.

The Question of Absences

My research benefits significantly from the writings and speeches that have been compiled and published as books. These compilations also come with prefaces and introductions which, more often than not, give the background of the composition, thus helping to situate it in contexts of their creation. For instance, one of these compilations that I use is the collection of an Assamese periodical named *Jonaki* published from the late 19th to the early years of the 20th century, by Assam Sahitya Sabha, and edited by Nagen Saikia, in 2001. It outlines the history of print in Assam and the context in which *Jonaki* began to be published—first from Calcutta in Bengal and later from Guwahati in Assam. Additionally, it provides crucial information on the funding of the periodical with details of advertisements that appeared in them, along with a partial list of customers and receipts of payment done by them.[23] Such works perform the dual function of primary and secondary sources in my study. While the introductory write-up, usually authored by the editors, provides useful secondary information, the periodical issues published in these compilations are primary materials for my study, which focus on the deliberations on the rising linguistic and nationalist sentiments among the educated elite in the colonial Brahmaputra Valley.

The issues of *Jonaki* were not preserved in any particular archive or library, and this necessitated Saikia to take up the laborious task of collecting these issues from multiple sources, including the homes of individuals who once subscribed to the periodical. Saikia began this work in the 1980s, and by the end of the decade, he submitted this compiled volume to the Assam Sahitya Sabha. The publication, however, was delayed due to a lack of sufficient funds and other associated concerns. Many of these issues could not be resolved successfully, and the editor has added notes to highlight these absences.[24] While letters to colonial officials, memoranda, and other such governmental documents that highlight the question of emerging linguistic sentiments among the people of the Valley can be found in the archives and periodicals, which contained long debates and deliberations on questions of a slowly consolidating 'Assamese' language, identity and religious practices, are missing from there. Thus, compilations such as these are instrumental in filling

[23] Nagen Saikia, ed., *Jonaki* (Guwahati: Assam Sahitya Sabha, 2001), 0.001-0.070.
[24] Saikia, Jonaki, 0.001–0.070.

the void and creating a portable collection of archivable documents which never made their way into the archives at all.

Most importantly, what stands out is the masculinity of the sources mentioned above. I use the term masculinity here, not just to refer to the male authors, editors, compilers, and colonial officials, but also to the rarity of reference to women at all. Women in all of these texts are written, if at all, as numbers and subjects, without according agency or even personhood in its real sense. Jahnabi Gogoi Nath analyses the depiction of women in the hagiographical works on Sankaradeva and writes about the portrayal of the image of a typical, suppressed wife, who preferred to stay with her husband as a slave even when he banished her from his house. This was in reference to the wife of a certain disciple of Madhavadeva (the spiritual heir of Sankaradeva) and the treatment he meted out to his wife.[25] To me, it poses a serious concern: how were the women imagining themselves in the changing socio-political contours of the Brahmaputra Valley within the colonial atmosphere of the 20th century? What was their relation with language, religion, and Sankaradeva's *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*? Nath also points towards an alternate depiction of women in the same sources on the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* which presented them as submissive wives. The 'women traders,' many of whom took to trading a range of different goods in the local markets after the death of their husbands, were often portrayed as clever and having agency.

Moreover, there were a few more examples wherein women were shown to have vocalised their opinions and ensured suitable actions in their favour. Explaining the differences in the depiction of women, Nath writes that in the initial phase of the movement, women of the perceived lower sections of society enjoyed greater mobility and agency as compared to those from the higher ranks. However, this distinction faded eventually, as Vaishnava norms became stringent for all with the passing of time.[26] Sarah Tyson titles her book as a fundamental question - *Where are the Women?* She emphasises that what is missing in the archives is not always a result of accidental loss, but rather "the consequence of enduring practices of interdiction." The absence of substantial

[25] Nath, "Women, Religion and Society in Assam," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 70 (2009), 329-37, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147679, accessed December 23, 2024.

[26] Ibid.

information on women in the archives is a result of underplaying women's agency in the making of history.[27]

Voices of women were seldom recorded in the written form, and thus it is unsurprising that we do not find them in the archives. Employing critical feminist theory in the study of archives, Cifor and Wood have highlighted the need to reimagine the archive in light of questions around community and organisation, and to bring in aspects of 'self-representation.' From the 1980s, as social history gained currency within the field of historical research, there was an increased interest in the absence of materials on women and other marginalised groups in the archives. This brought forth the need to imagine and create alternate archives, which could adequately include the unrepresented voices in history.[28] Thus, the idea is not just to highlight the absences, but also to initiate a process whereby this can be undone, if necessary, outside conventional archival spaces. Antoinette Burton projects the transformation of the domestic space, a site of memory, into an archive of sources based on which women construct their histories.[29] Burton dismantles the barriers between the private and public in this process and reclaims these spaces for women in history. The imagining of such non-conventional spaces as archives allows researchers to tackle with the silences in narrativising the past, which is especially significant for groups hitherto excluded from the pages of history to assert their presence and authority.

For our study, where written sources accorded to women or even delegating recognisable spaces to them are hard to come across, one might need to turn to everyday practices to see how women carry their generations of wisdom forward. Here, a non-visit to the archives is not only a choice that I make, but a necessity to try and fill the void in the archives. In my interactions with women who regularly visit the *Naamghar*s, at least in the Assamese month of *Bhado*, which is considered the birth month of Sankaradeva, almost all of them expressed that they have learnt the etiquette to be followed during prayers or

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[27] Sarah Tyson, *Where are the Women? Why Expanding the Archive Makes Philosophy Better* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), Xxxii, 142.

[28] Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, "Critical Feminism in the Archives," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, no. 2 (2017), 4-8, http://dx.doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.27, accessed on 24 December, 2024.

[29] Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4-5.

any religious event from elder women in the family or others in the vicinity through keen observation. This is the most common mode of knowledge transmission in human history, and it continues to remain so. However, for people like us, who are not necessarily from families that practice the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, that opportunity for prolonged observation of how women navigate these spaces, and the memories that they carry with them is hard to come by. A study of the relevance of memory passed down through generations, which carries the wisdom of how to navigate the contours of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, especially for non-males, perhaps needs to be undertaken. This would fill the gap left behind by the dearth of references to or texts attributed to women and other genders within the fold of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*.

In Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to highlight how a study, based primarily on textual sources, has been conducted without visiting the archives in the conventional sense of the term. On the contrary, archival documents have been accessed from alternate sources, including the digital medium. I use the term archival documents here to refer to rare texts of the past that proved significant for my study; alternatively, texts that ought to be archived. Compilations of old manuscripts, their re-publication, and further digitisation have helped my study immensely, providing access to documents whose original copies are either inaccessible or difficult to access. In a way, this article is a documentation of my non-visits to the archives, each of which serves as a testament to the use of alternate places to locate the required texts.

The changing concept of archives, especially those that bring the documents out of the confines of a single physical building controlled by a system of permissions, has been instrumental in facilitating research. It dismantles the physicality of the archive while broadening it to include one's own collection of accessible hard and soft copies of documents. It marks a transition from public to personal, with materials that are not necessarily protected by lines of permissions for access. I prepared Excel sheets with links to websites that host these materials. This cataloguing, in itself, constitutes the preparation of another type of source for the study of digital archival spaces. These websites enable the retention of the archival material for a longer duration, not

downloadable yet accessible unlimited times. However, what is also required is to move beyond texts to locate voices that have not been documented. In the context of my study, I have highlighted the absence or dismal representation of women in the textual sources. This creates the need to look beyond the available textual materials, and locate how knowledge and information have been transmitted without formal documentation. A clue to this may possibly be found in the songs, prayers, verses, and rituals carried out by women, which were also inherited by their daughters, and have the potential to be deciphered through a more ethnographic turn in my research, which is in the pipeline at the moment.

Non-visits to archives, as I continue my doctoral research, have not been a conscious choice, least of all has this practice been a statement against the relevance of archives today. Rather, they have been a necessity of my study, wherein most of the sources had to be located outside of the conventional archival spaces. The archives remain as relevant today as ever, the testimony of it lies in the ever-expanding notion of the 'archive' tailored to cater to the requirements of the present. The focus has shifted to understanding how archives are created in the first place, and identifying the human processes involved in building these seemingly impersonal spaces. Humans working at different levels of the conventional archives shape these spaces through layers of processes—starting from deciding which documents to preserve, to how to arrange and catalogue the same, the process of digitisation, determining the degree of accessibility, key-wording, and a range of other tasks. This understanding allows us to see archives as subjective, dynamic, and evolving entities. This, on the other hand, allows the acknowledgement of silences and absences present within conventional archives, and necessitates a re-imagination of these spaces. Thus, the idea of archives has moved beyond the notion of state-funded organisations devoted to the preservation of official, government documents. This paper attempted to briefly trace the trajectory of that departure.

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Historicizing the *Shibsankirtankavya*: Conceptualising the Brahmanical Socio-Moral Order of Early Modern Bengal

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The Shibsankirtankavya is a mangalkavya that is also part of a larger corpus of popular 'loukik' (folk) poems composed about the deity Shiva. The kavya doesn't include an account of any politically relevant contemporary event, which is the primary reason why it has been neglected by historians to a great extent as a source of Bengal's history. However, it is replete with an in-depth understanding of the contemporary social and economic conditions of the region of Rarh or western Bengal in the early eighteenth century. The descriptions of an intoxicated and beggarly Shiva's transition into the role of an agrarian householder; the skirmishes within the God's household, between the spouses (Shiva and Parvati), reflect a very crude description of early modern rural life. Such humanised depictions of the deities highlight the interdependence of the agrarian and fishing economies within the region. Set in the rural backdrop of 18th century Rarh, the primary theme recognized in this paper is that of agrarian expansion, and its consequences on the Brahmanical religion. Apart from official records, contemporary anthropological surveys too serve as a useful source for understanding both the nature and purpose of the verse narrative. The patron of the text, a zamindar, utilises the didactic nature of the performative mangalkavyas to communicate with his subjects, his source of revenue, in prioritising the aim of maximising revenue-extraction and the setting up of a social and moral order that is conducive for the expansion and effective fruition of the agrarian process within the ambit of a Brahmanical socio-moral order.

Keywords: *Shibsankirtankavya*, Brahmanical order, agrarianisation, gender norms, early modern Bengal

The *Shibsankirtankavya* is a work of fiction. Despite sounding like a disclaimer before the start of a movie, one needs to be mindful of this fact before delving into the translations and analyses that unfold in this paper.[1] This particular

[1] This article includes excerpts from the primary source of this study—*Shibsankirtan ba Shibayan* (Rameswara, *Shibsankirtan ba Shibayan*, edited by Jogilal Haldar. Kolkata: University of Calcutta Press, 2012)—which have been translated and transliterated by the author. The translations aim to be as literal as possible. To ensure accuracy, lexicographical resources such

mangalkavya is rooted in the rural tracts of the region of Rarh (western) Bengal.[2] Several popular '*loukik*' (folk) poems praising Shiva had already been in circulation within the region by the 17th century.[3] The spread of agricultural expansion had further led to the production of popular Shakta and Shaivite literary trends.[4] The popularity of these poems is evident in their production in huge numbers throughout the 17th as well as early 18th centuries.[5] This paper attempts to conceptualise the nature of Bengal's Brahmanical socio-moral order[6] in the early modern period through a close reading of the

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as a Bengali–English dictionary (Sailendra Biswas, *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan (Dictionary of the Bengali Language)*, 4th ed. Kolkata: Shishu Sahitya Samsad Pvt. Ltd., 1984, ISBN 81-85626-05-7) and a thesaurus (Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, *Samsad Samarthasabda Kosh (Bengali Thesaurus)*, 3rd ed. Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, April 2013) have been consulted. These tools were also used to determine the specific meanings of Bengali words within their original context. As the *kavya* was composed in Middle Bengali, it contains several archaic terms that require careful attention during translation. Where necessary, explanatory material has been added within brackets to convey meaning as clearly as possible.

[2] *Mangalkavyas* are narrative verses written in the *pancali* style of poetry in Bengali that are associated with a particular deity. They are part of a rich performative as well as oral tradition of the region. These verses are devotional in nature. However, they have been used as sources for historical reconstruction by scholars studying the early modern period in history. See: David Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Maṅgal-kābya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal*, (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008). For a deeper understanding of the nature of the Rarh- western part of the region of Bengal- in the early modern period, see: Geddes, Arthur, 'The Regions of Bengal', *Geography 15, no. 3*, 1929, pp. 186–98.

[3] Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, *Bangla sahityer itivrtta* (Calcutta: Modern Book Agency, 1981).

[4] Richard Eaton has succinctly argued that the spread of agriculture is directly related to the establishment of Sufi *khanqahs* in the region. This relationship between popular religious trends and the entrenchment of notions relating to the materiality of the region has been inspired by his work. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[5] Rameswara, "Introduction," in *Shib-sankirtan ba Shibayan*, ed. Jogilal Haldar (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 2012),1-58. This version of the *mangalkavya* dates to the early-mid eighteenth century.

[6] The Brahmanical socio-moral order is the system by which upper caste Hindus, the Brahmans, maintain their control over religious authority as well as over literature, whether scriptural or normative. This control establishes caste-based, gender-based as well as class-based stratification in society. In order to maintain and extend this authority of the upper-class and caste male, it was essential for the political authorities (also upper caste) of the region to capitalise on literature as an ideological instrument to reiterate these norms and values on which the entire structure of a Brahmanical society is based. The stratification must be maintained while allowing for the increase in the popularity of the belief system. Uma

Shibsankirtankavya, composed in the early eighteenth century. The poem has eight *palas* or divisions. From the fourth part onwards, the poem contains descriptions from the popular oral traditions centred on Shiva and his household, along with Puranic plots and references.

The descriptions of an intoxicated, beggarly Shiva and the skirmishes within God's household—between the spouses (Shiva and Parvati)—reflect a very crude description of rural life. These realistic depictions highlight the dependence of the rural population on agricultural produce as well as the fishing economy. Based on this larger socio-economic context, it is possible to explore other themes such as the gendering of society and the moral norms and proprieties expected of a woman belonging to a higher socio-economic background. The comparison between such ideal upper caste women and the lower-caste women of the agrarian society provides a richer understanding of the contemporary Brahmanical social order. The diverse audience of this *kavya* reflects the social diversity within the region. The narrative further reflects the familiarity of the poet with the nature of agricultural production in the western parts of the region. This awareness translates into the didactic message of the *mangalkavya*s that attempted to reshape the norms of an agrarian society.

Methodological Framework

Velcheru Narayan Rao, David Dean Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have proposed that "history is written in the dominant literary genre of a particular community, located in space, at a given moment in time."[7] Their argument rests on the idea that early modern texts consisted of both 'fictional' as well as 'factual' narratives within the same genre. This distinction could be made by the readers or the recipients of such literature. Newly ascendant groups of political authority often attempt to dominate such local versions of the past by denying them historical legitimacy. The textual tradition has textures that the reader is able to identify within a specific social context.

Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14, (1993): 579–85.

[7] Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Dean Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800* (India: Other Press, 2003), 1-19.

Changes over time in such contexts have led to such a connection between the literature and the people of its locality being disrupted.[8]

The *mangalkavya*s being looked at here were not produced by the semi-literate sections of society, like the *Kumara-ramuni katha* studied by Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, but by individuals who represented the clerical class of the powerful landholding groups of the region – the *zamindars*. The receptors of these texts, therefore, were able to identify the textures due to their relatability to the social and economic themes addressed in them. Scholars have suggested the necessity of critical and appropriate methods to interpret historical texts of the early modern period in order to identify the genres of literature that may be viewed as "distinctly historical narratives."[9] The most important marker of the historicity of such texts is the awareness of the community of receptors of these texts especially regarding their historical nature. Not only were vernacular traditions more widely circulated and received, but they were also required to include themes that could be identified by the readers and listeners of the texts as representative of the cultural identity of the region.

Partha Chatterjee has rightly cautioned against presumptions based on the Rao-Shulman-Subrahmanyan analysis regarding the identification of early modern historical literature. The variation in the nature of such literary traditions across early modern India and its diverse linguistic regions must be taken into account while arguing for the historicity of such texts. He has recognised an "amoral realism" in the *mangalkavya* literature of early modern Bengal in its representations of even the divine world as one marked by mundane human sentiments and aspirations.[10] The *Shibsankirtankavya*'s narrative is replete with such depictions. Bandhyopadhyay argues that, apart from Mukundaram, no other poet portrays God in this manner.[11] Sometimes

[8] Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, 1-11.

[9] Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, eds., 'Introduction,' in *History in the Vernacular*, 2008, 4.

[10] Ibid., 6.

[11] Mukundaram Chakraborty composed the *Chandimangalkavya; see* Asit Kumar Bandhyopadhyay, *Bangla sahityer itivrtta*, 225.

Shiva, Parvati, and other lesser deities, like *Narada* and *Vishwakarma*, are humanised to such an extent that they are no longer depicted as deities.[12]

The colonial classification of historical time has been challenged by Romila Thapar as she explores the understanding of time in the subcontinent. Time was no longer seen as represented by a linear series of politically motivated events.[13] With respect to this reorganisation of temporal frames in Indian history, one can identify two recently established categories: the 'early medieval' and the 'early modern.' While separated by centuries, these periods shared a lot in terms of the shifts and adjustments experienced by various regions during this transition period.[14] Such shifts were motivated by

[12] For instance, the nickname '*Bishai*' has been used for the deity *Vishwakarma*, who is called on by Shiva first during the preparation for agrarian production, and later during the manufacturing of the *'shankha'* or conch-shell bangle demanded by Parvati.

[13] The concept of time as being cyclic in nature rather than linear within Indian historiography has been looked at using ancient Puranic, as well as Jain and Buddhist materials by Thapar. She has associated the conceptualisation of historical time within Indigenous literary sources with the cosmological concepts around time. The creation of the Universe is often considered to be a starting point in these sources and time is measured in cycles of destruction and reincarnation thereafter. Notwithstanding the mythological nature of such ideas around time, Thapar clearly argues for the representation of historical change in such textual materials. Thereby, she staunchly argues against the claims of 'ahistoricity' attributed by colonial historians to the ancient and early modern pasts of the subcontinent. See Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). Also see, Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*.

[14] The controversies surrounding the early medieval period are like those associated with the periodization of the early modern period, both being marked by political disruptions in various regions across the subcontinent. These periods have long been associated with debates regarding change or continuity, rather than being studied for their specificities. Each of these periods has been looked at by historians, in recent decades as separate periods marked by historical transformations unique to them. Sanjay Subrahmanyam has attributed many of these changes, specifically with reference to the 'early modern' as a period, to human agency. The wide scope of sources available on this period has been enriched in terms of the textures of multilingual and multicultural inclusions made by historians like Sanjay Subrahmanyam, John F. Richards, Partha Chatterjee, Tilottama Mukherjee, and Raziuddin Aquil, among others, in their writings and edited volumes on the period, See: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750." *Daedalus, Volume 127, no. 3,* (1998): 75–104; John F. Richards, "Early Modern India and World History", *Journal of World History,* Vol. 8.2, 1997, and, Partha Chatterjee and Raziuddin Aquil edited, *History in the Vernacular*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, and, Raziuddin Aquil, and Tilottama

economic growth and expansion, among other factors. The shaping of society and economy in the post-Gupta period was marked by political decentralisation and the emergence of regional nexuses of power. Notwithstanding the scholarly debates around the identification of European constructs of 'feudalism' in society, the increasing number of land grants and emerging groups of landed proprietors of *samantas* in the early medieval period were a direct consequence of the agricultural expansion taking place during this period. Along with the inclusion of previously uncultivated land into the agrarian frame, these land grants depict a reordering of local and regional political organisations of power.

Accompanying such studies on the changing economy and society of the period, attention was paid to the impact that such changes had on the moral ordering of society. The study of the various origin myths of the regional ruling groups, such as the Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas, reflects such a socio-political reordering of the religious moral order.[15] The study of history using literature, especially religious as well as mythological narratives, is incomplete without anthropological and archaeological fieldwork due to the interpretative nature of such literary traditions. Often, such literary works are used as ideological tools for coercion as well as the assimilation of competing religious and cultural traditions.[16] Kosambi's analysis of the transition from

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Mukherjee, eds., *An Earthly Paradise: Trade, Politics and Culture in Early Modern Bengal*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2020).

[15] Notwithstanding the debate between the scholars regarding the presence of a feudal order in the subcontinent, the historians agree on the growth of regional polities that capitalised on the expansion of agriculture. In order to expand agriculture, these emerging polities employed the system of granting rent-free lands (*Brahmadeya* grants) to people of religious significance. This was intended to utilise religion as a tool to establish a social and moral order favourable to the ruling groups as well as the established Brahmanical religious elites. The various myths that were formulated by the court poets of these polities regarding the origin of relatively new groups drew inspiration as well as added to the Puranic literature of the times. See, R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society (*New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001); B.D. Chattopadhyay, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford Paperbacks, 1994) 28-34.

[16] D.D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962).

tribe to caste and the transition from clan-based society to state, using religious texts to understand such processes, provides a useful model for this study.[17]

The various regions that were brought under the plough in the early medieval period consisted of groups of tribal populations who had to be incorporated into the larger political setup of the sedentary populations of the regions. The examples of such assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation found in early modern religious texts brought about a significant shift in Hindu religious practices, as a more inclusive and popular form of Hinduism—Puranic Hinduism—came into existence with the help of religious didactic literature like the Puranas.[18] The rules guiding moral conduct in society were simultaneously framed in such Puranic literature, which was established in the regions as a valid source of religious legitimacy.

The early modern period was representative of similar shifts in society. Like the early medieval period, it was marked by a need to focus on the study of specific regions rather than the entire subcontinent. B.P. Sahu's study of regions in the early medieval past formulated methodologies to study regions despite the paucity of adequate official historical documentation of the ancient and early medieval past of the region. The epigraphical evidence, as well as the contemporary literature of the time, has the potential to serve as legitimate historical sources for reconstructing this period. The 18th century witnessed the production of state-sponsored literary works, especially those belonging to the Mughal *Tarikh* tradition of history writing.[19] Despite the availability of such Persian court chronicles, many of which were written in the region by

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[17] Romila Thapar, 'Early Indian History and the Legacy of D D Kosambi,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 30 (Jul. 26-August 1, 2008): 43-51.

[18] The studies focus on the religious acculturation of lower-caste and tribal groups in society into the Brahmanic pantheon. They highlight the system of *'Dana'* as instrumental in such a change. The ritual gift-giving of lands was accompanied by the production of literature that helped in the assimilation of groups that were situated on the margins of society. It is through the critical study of such works that the argument regarding Puranic Hinduism is formulated. see, Vijay Nath, *Purāṇas and Acculturation: A Historico-Anthropological Perspective* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001); Vijay Nath, *Dynamics of the Ritual Gift System: Some Unexplored Dimensions* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012).

[19] Syed Ejaz Hussain, 'Political History and Historiography of Bengal Subah, 1700–1757,' in *A Comprehensive History of Modern Bengal, 1700-1950*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 2020), 2-8.

scribal classes, the religious literary traditions of the period depict a less biased and more inclusive depiction of the region's social, political, and economic conditions. Therefore, Puranic literary traditions like the *mangalkavya*s serve as an effective source for reconstructing the regional history of early modern Bengal.

The methodological framework, therefore, combines the study of languages and literature with that of historians who have worked on various facets of the history of the early modern past of this region using a diverse range of source materials. This particular study, however, recognises the *Shibsankirtankavya* as a work of literature that also serves as an insightful source of history. The study of the process of literary production has merged the disciplines of history, sociology, and literature within the same fold. This process looks at the functionality of works of literature as a whole.[20] The literature has distinctive elements reflective of the contemporary region, rather than being limited to the courts. Despite being heavily influenced by other popular narratives around the God Shiva, the *kavya* abides by the format of the *mangalkavya*s recognised by scholars of Bengali literature, which are defined as religious, didactic narrative poems written for the primary purpose of popularising and establishing the worship and religious authority of a particular deity belonging to the Hindu, Brahmanical religious pantheon. Their commonality with other early modern devotional literature also lies in their circulation, reception, and broader socio-economic functions.

Contextualising the *Mangalkavya*

The poet of the *kavya*, Rameshwar Bhattacharya (also known as Rameshwar Chakraborty), was from Jadupur village, Baroda pargana, Medinipur district. Born roughly in the year 1677, he relocated to Karnagarh village and continued to write the *Shibsankirtankavya* under the patronage of a *zamindar*—Jaswant Singh, son of Ram Singh. The *Shibsankirtankavya* itself has no details regarding the relationship between the *zamindar* and the reigning Nawab during the composition of the text. However, Jadunath Sarkar has mentioned the *zamindar* in the second volume of his extensive '*History of Bengal*' as Jaswant Ray, a munshi working under the governorship of Murshid Quli Khan, who

[20] Manfred Naumann and Peter Heath, "Literary Production and Reception," *New Literary History* 8, no. 1 (1976): 107–26.

had been well-trained in administrative duties. Jaswant Ray had patronised the composition of the *Shibsankirtankavya* after he had returned to Karnagarh.

The manuscript of the *Shibsankirtankavya* may be roughly dated between 1735 and 1750. Bengali litterateurs have often situated the *Shibsankirtankavya* within a longer tradition of popular Shaivite compositions. Dinesh Chandra Sen mentions two other manuscripts of the '*Shibayan*' written by two other poets—Rameshwar and Ram Krishna—which have been dated to around 1763 and the early 17th century, respectively. However, not only was the *Shibayan* composed nearly a century before the *Shibsankirtankavya*, its main plot greatly deviated from it. The *mangalkavya* begins with the praise and devotion to a group of locally established Puranic deities, along with a poem praising the Bhakti saint Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.[21] The *mangalkavya*s are part of a rich vernacular tradition of the region that the people of the region were not only accustomed to but could also easily understand when compared to expository literature produced in Sanskrit philosophy. The inclusion of various gods that were already well-established in the region was not to popularise them but to legitimise the narrative of the texts by making them relatable to the audience.

The *Shibsankirtankavya*, motivated by the popular Vaisnava bhakti tradition, includes the story of Krishna and Rukmini. It also narrates the mythological love story of Usha and Aniruddha. Looking at *'danava'* and *'asura'* (demon) kings in the rich mythological history of Assam, K.N. Dutt has noted the myth around an *asura* king—referred to as Bana—who ruled from his capital at Sonitpur (believed by Dutt to be the same as modern-day Tezpur). This genealogical, as well as mythological account, included the love story between Bana's daughter Usha and Shri Krishna's ancestor, Aniruddha.[22] The presence of similar love stories represents an existing pan-regional Bhakti ideology of devotional love, in both its Vaisnava and Sufi forms. A study by Aditya Behl, of the prologues of the Hindavi Sufi *premakhyans* or romances, which were composed between the 14th and 16th centuries, has emphasised such poetic

[21] Tony K. Stewart has extensively studied the shaping of the devotional Vaisnava Gaudiya tradition over centuries using hagiographical materials on the bhakti saint Sri Chaitanya Dev. see, Tony K. Stewart, *The Final Word: The Caitanya Caritamrita and the Grammar of Religious Tradition (*United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[22] K.N. Dutt, "Problems in the History of Assam," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 23* (1960): 164–69.

inaugurations. Similarly, the *Shibsankirtankavya* and other completed *mangalkavya*s began with a series of poems that were not as relevant to the main plot of the poem but were crucial in introducing and contextualising these works within a specific socio-historical context.[23]

The study of middle Bengali narrative literature was spearheaded by David Curley and Kumkum Chatterjee.[24] The most recent contributions in this space have been by Thibaut d'Hubert and Ayesha Irani.[25] While Chatterjee looked for a Persianate cultural influence, Thibaut articulated a political and literary culture, deeply rooted in the Arakan region of Bengal. Regardless of their focus of study, their research has paved the way for the use of such literature in recovering vernacular records of the region's past society, economy, and political culture. Such forms of literature, unlike other works of popular fiction, were composed in order to fulfil a range of functions motivated by the larger political and socio-economic contexts of the early modern past of Bengal. This process begins with the act of patronage being provided and the *mangalkavya* being composed by the author but is only complete with the consumption of such literary products by its distribution amidst rural audiences. The dialectical relationship between the production and consumption of literature allows a historian to critically read the text as a whole rather than in parts.[26]

Parvati's Desire for Economic Prosperity

A shift in the delta and agrarian expansion eastwards were hardly an indicator of agricultural decline in the already cultivated western parts of the region. Rajat Datta's studies on the commercially vibrant rice-based economy of the

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[23] Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 31.

[24] Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal (*New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009) and, David Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Maṅgal-kābya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008).

[25] Thibaut D'Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan (*United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018) and, Ayesha A. Irani, *The Muhammad Avatāra: Salvation History, Translation, and the Making of Bengali Islam* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[26] Naumann and Heath, "Literary Production and Reception," 118.

region reinforce the success in attempts by the political and religious authorities within the region in actualising the aspirations of a growing agrarian economic order.[27] The task at hand, therefore, for the landed authorities—the *zamindars* and *qanungos* of Rarh Bengal—was to ensure agrarian prosperity and proper revenue collection in these areas. The *Shibsankirtankavya* was a part of this larger process.

As a process in itself, the *mangalkavya* addresses the changes required within the households of an economically rising group of people, and society at large, in order to make the transition as smooth as possible. The choice of Shiva as the main deity of the poem is based on the significance of the deity in the region's popular religious and cultural practices. Scholars have traced the origins of Shiva and the widely popular cult that has been shaped around him to 'primitive and aniconic cult-stones.'[28] Bengal's Shaivite faith has been shaped by the socio-economic needs of the region. The role of a householder played by the deity in Bengali peasant society is unique to the region according to Ashutosh Bhattacharya, and therefore a reflection of the region's cultural imagination.[29] Such a positioning of the deity is part of the larger process of tribalisation of the Brahmanic religion, and in some of its stages, Shiva came into violent conflict with the various mother-goddesses who had previously been senior deities. Therefore, if one compares the two deities —Shiva and Parvati—in the region, then their characterisation, as well as origins, are not only different but also often conflictual in terms of the values they represent. The opposition in their characterisation goes beyond the obvious gendered differences. Parvati's character in the *Shibsankirtankavya*, as an ideal wife of a peasant household is more aligned with the norms of the Brahmanical society while Shiva is portrayed as the deity catering to a wider audience, belonging to the lower classes and castes as well, for whom he is a well-established and more relatable religious figure.

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[27] Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, 1760-1880* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000).

[28] D.D. Kosambi, Introduction, in *Myth and Reality*, 3.

[29] Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bangla Mangal Kabyer Itihas (*Kolkata: Modern Book Agency, reprint, 2006), 177.

The narrative of the *Shibsankirtankavya*, in many ways, 'peasantises'[30] the deity by turning him into a cultivator, and the driving force behind this process is the character of Parvati. While describing the life of Shiva as a beggar, he is shown as incapable of providing for a growing household consisting of children and a retinue of servants. The main topic of contention between Shiva and Parvati within the narrative was the lack of food and nourishment for such a large household. Acting in accordance with the role of the ideal wife, Parvati is not a meek and subservient wife. The ideal wife is also portrayed as being a source of wisdom and practical know-how, viewed as necessary for the economic growth of the family as a unit of the larger agrarian society. While delving into these excerpts, one must again be mindful of the narrative being composed by an upper-caste man for a predominantly female audience. There is an attempt by the poet to ingrain positive values around cultivation within the rural population through his narrative. This is evident in the following lines of the poem, which serve as a direct message to women as vehicles for the spread of such didactic messages:

> গৃহস্থের গৃহ চলে গৃহিনীর গুণে ।
> ফেল্যা দিয়া পুরুষ পাসরে সে কি জানে ।।[31]
>
> *Grihosther griho choley grihinir guney* |
> *Phelya diya purush pashorey shey ki jaane* ||
>
> A householder's home functions based on the qualities of the woman of the house,

[30] The term refers to the conversion of people's profession from tribal professions to agrarian activities, that are relatively sedentary in nature. In defining the early medieval period, scholars have argued that the period not only experienced agrarian expansion across various regions of the subcontinent and the spread of state societies through local state formation, but also the 'peasantization' of tribes and their incorporation within the 'varna-jati' framework. The dominant form of sustenance among the tribal communities was pastoralism. There was a subtle movement of the tribals towards sedentarisation. This process of sedentarisation of the pastoralists continued unabated throughout the medieval period. B. D. Chattopadhyaya argues that the commercialization of agriculture and the increase in the extent of cultivation were the two crucial factors behind this transformation; B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[31] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 218.

Forgetting about these mundane necessities, men fail to understand their importance.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

The descriptions of the farming process, and the various measures to be taken up before the actual agricultural production takes place, are instructed by Parvati to Shiva. Rather than focusing on the detailed descriptions of the farming process, the initial exchange between the couple highlights the psychological barriers that an individual has to overcome in order to begin agrarian expansion. This reflects a dilemma that agrarian society faces, wherein agrarian production is crucial to its survival, but it also becomes a source of great torment in practice. At the end of this discussion, Shiva accepts that he must engage in agricultural expansion in order to feed his thriving household.

চষ ত্রিলোচন চাষ চষ ত্রিলোচন ।
নহে দাসদাসী আদি ছাড় পরিজন ।।
চরণে ধরিয়া চন্ডী চন্দ্রচুড়ে সাধে ।
নরমে গরমে কয় ভয় নাই বাধে ।।
বিপরীত নিত্য প্রতি শুনিয়া বিস্তর ।
বিশদ বিশদ ভাব্যা দিলেন উত্তর ।।
বলি বিলক্ষণ কিছু শুন শৈলসুতা ।
দেবতার পোত-বৃত্তি বড়ই লঘুতা ।।
ভিক্ষে দুঃখে আছি ভাল অকিঞ্চন পণে ।
চাষ চষ্যা বিস্তর উদ্বেগ পাব মনে ।।
শুনিতে সুন্দর চাষ শুনিতে সুন্দর ।
সকল সম্পূর্ণ যার তার নাই ডর ।।
চাষ বলে ওরে চাষী তোরে আগে খাব ।
মোরে খাবে পশ্চাতে যদ্যপি ক্ষেতে হব ।।
অনেক যতনে ক্ষেতে শস্য উপস্থিত ।
সুখা হাজা পড়িলে পশ্চাতে বিপরীত ।।
গরীবের ভাগ্যে যদি শস্য হয় তাজা ।
বার কর্‍্যা সকল আনয়ে লয় রাজা ।।
ক্ষেতে দেখ্যা খন্দ যদি খাত্যে নাই পায় ।
কুতকাতে কায়েত কিফাত করে তায় ।।
কাদা পানি খায়্যা ক্ষেতে কর্‍্যা চাষিপনা ।
নরোত্তম ছাড়্যা নরাধম উপাসনা ।।

চাষ অভিলাষ ক্ষমা কর ক্ষেমঙ্করী ।
আর কিছু ব্যাবসায় বল তাহা করি ।।[32]

Chosho Trilochan chaash chosho Trilochan ।
Nohey dash dashi aadi chaaro porijon ।।
Chorone dhoriya chondi chondrochurey shaadhey ।
Norome gorome koy bhoy nahi baadhey ।।
Biporit nrityo poti shuniya bistor ।
Bishod bishod Bhabya dilen uttor ।।
Boli bilokkhon kintu shuno shoiloshuta ।
Debotaar potobritti boroi loghuta ।।
Bhikkhe dukkha achi bhalo okinchon poney ।
Chaash choshya bistor udbeg paabo money ।।
Shunite shundor chaash shunite shundor ।
Shokol shompurno jaar taar naahi dor ।।
Chaash boley orey chaashi torey aage khabo ।
Morey khabey poshchatey jodyapi khetey hobo ।।
Onek jotoney khetey shoshyo uposthit ।
Shukha haaja poriley poshchatey biporit ।।
Goriber bhagye jodi shoshyo hoy taajaa ।
Baar koriya shokol aanoye loy raja ।।
Khetey dakhya khondo jodi khatye nayi pay ।
Kutkaate kaayet kifaat korey taaye ।।
Kaada paani khaiya khete korya chaashipona ।
Norottom chaarya noraadhom upashonaa ।।
Chaash obhilaash khoma koro khemonkori ।
Aar kichu babshyaye bolo taha kori ।।

Parvati appeals to Shiva to cultivate the agricultural field,
Otherwise, he should forget all the servants employed in his household.
Parvati begs at Shiva's feet in persuading him,
Using various strict as well as cajoling tactics, asking him to not be hindered by fear.
After listening to all Parvati had to say,

[32] Ibid.

Shiva contemplated it for a long time and then responded.
(Shiva says) "I am saying negative things but listen to me Parvati,
A God's lifestyle is supposed to be frugal.
I beg and I am poor, but I am also carefree.
Engaging in agricultural activities will create anxiety in my mind.
Farming sounds easy,
Agriculture says to the farmer that it will consume the cultivator first,
Only then can you obtain food from the profession, provided the fields are successfully cultivated.
One needs to be very meticulous in cultivating crops in a field,
Famine and disease can easily lead to crop failure.
If the poor farmer is able to harvest good crops,
The king extracts all of it from the farmer through taxation.
When one can see the fields filled with crops but still have to remain hungry,
They express their despair and helplessness.
After surviving on mud and water, by toiling in the fields as a farmer,
My position as one of the most revered Gods will be upturned.
The initiative of farming is something that I cannot take up Parvati
Suggest any other profession and I will engage in it.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

The poet seems to be describing the struggles of the average cultivator in the region. The popularity of the narrative could only be achieved by being as sympathetic to the audience as possible, while also acting as a gentle reminder of the importance of agricultural production for the survival of the rural household in the early modern economy of Bengal. The maximisation of revenue and its collection was rooted in the continuance and growth of agricultural production within the region.

The problems faced by agriculturists are highlighted in detail, further strengthening the argument for the instructive nature of the *Shibsankirtankavya*, when Parvati, on *Narada's* advice, sends several hurdles to bring back her absentee, beggar-turned-farmer husband. The way in which these problems, namely the *daash-maachi* (poisonous flies), *mosha* (mosquito), and *jok* (leech), were dealt with by Shiva, successfully overcoming all the

hindrances to the agrarian process, is all instructive in nature rather than simply adding to the dramatisation of the narrative.[33]

The *shankha* is a conch-shell bangle that is associated with the Hindu married woman as a mark of auspiciousness to date.[34] Even though a detailed study into the evolution and association of religio-cultural symbolism with the object is beyond the scope of this study, it is relevant for understanding the economic aspirations of an early modern Bengali society. Tilottama Mukherjee's study of the nature of commodity consumption within early modern Bengal's urban milieu has identified in the eastern parts of the region names of localities that to date reflect the specialised crafts produced in them. One such locality, still known as *'Shankhabazar'* (shell-workers locality), is especially relevant to this section as it denotes the persistence of guild-like artisanal localities of non-agricultural commodities endemic to the region.[35] The *mangalkavya,* incorporating the object at the heart of the climax of its narrative, shows how the *Shibsankirtankavya* was written for a rural society wherein such cultural values were well-entrenched, and non-agricultural commodity-production was gaining ground within the rural landscape of *Rarh* Bengal.

The *shankha* episode describes such a non-agricultural transaction taking place in the paternal home of Parvati. Parvati's desire is expressed keeping in mind the way she is perceived in society. She rationalises her desire by directly claiming a better position in society having her wrists adorned by the conch-shell bangle.

> লজ্জায় লোকের কাছে দন্ডাইয়া রই ।
> হাত নাড়া দিয়া বাড়া কথা নাই কই ।।
> তুল ডাটি পারা দুটী হস্ত দেখ মোর ।
> শঙ্খ দিলে প্রভুর পুণ্যের নাহি ওর ।।[36]

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[33] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 248-255.

[34] Partho Burman, "Sankha Conch Bangles: How Bengal's Sankhari Community is Fighting All Odds to Keep the Craft Alive", *30 Stades*, April 23, 2021, https://30stades.com/2021/04/23/sankha-conch-bangles-bengals-sankhari-fighting-odds-to-keep-craft-alive-sankha-pola/.

[35] Tilottama Mukherjee, *Political Culture and Economy in Eighteenth-century Bengal: Networks of Exchange, Consumption and Communication* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013), 66.

[36] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 279-280.

Lojja-ey loker kaachey dondaiya roi |
Haat naara diya baara kotha nayi koi ||
Tulo daati paara duti hosto dekho mor |
Shonkho diley probhur punyer naahi or ||

She (Parvati) highlights the shame she feels to face people in society.
She is unable to talk to people without using hand gestures.
She shows him her wrists, as soft as the stem of the cotton plant.
If he gifts her the conch-shell bangles, his generosity will have no limits.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

This transaction that takes place between Shiva, disguised as a craftsman, and the women of Himalaya's household, primarily Parvati and her female companions, is symbolic of such transactions taking place in the early modern past of the region. In this section, the disguised Shiva recites a poem titled *Shankar-i-Shotidhormo Bornon* (The description of Sati's dharma), which is in the form of a direct message to all respectable women in contemporary society. The poem sheds light on the patriarchal norms prevalent in society.

নারীর কৌমারে পিতা রক্ষা করে যৌবনে রক্ষিতা প্রভু।
বৃদ্ধে পুত্র পাল্যে নারী তিনকালে স্বতন্তরা নহে কভু।।

Naari-r koumarey pita rokhha korey Joubone rokhhita probhu |
Briddhe-y putro paaley Naari tinkaley Shotontora nohey kobhu ||[37]

A father protects a woman in her childhood, Her youth is preserved by her husband,
During old-age her son nurtures her, A woman -through the three life stages- can never be independent.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

It is noteworthy that neither the above excerpt nor the other socio-moral instructions contained in the *kavya,* are exclusive to it. The norms on morality

[37] Ibid., 314.

and gender are a continuation of a temporally and spatially wider tradition of Brahmanical literature. The *Manusmriti* contains the following lines:

> बालया वा युवत्या वा वृद्धया वापि योषिता।
> न स्वातन्त्र्येण कर्तव्यं किंचित्कार्यं गृहेष्वपि॥१४७॥
> बाल्ये पितुर्वशे तिष्ठेत् पाणिग्राहस्य यौवने।
> पुत्राणां भर्तरि प्रेते न भजेत स्वातन्त्रताम्॥१४८॥[38]

The translation for the same excerpt is as follows:

> "Even in their own homes, a female—whether she is a child, a young woman, or an
> old lady—should never carry out any task independently.
> As a child, she must remain under her father's control;
> as a young woman, under her husband's;
> and when her husband is dead, under her sons'.
> She must never seek to live independently."[39]

Gendered by Caste and Class

The production of such *mangalkavya* narratives may be viewed as part of the larger social process that has shaped men, women, and social institutions in early India. Admitting that the subordination of women is common to all stages of the early Indian past, Uma Chakravarti has argued that the extent and form of that subordination have been conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which women have been placed.[40] The nature and extent of subordination are better understood using such popular narratives that women across society were listening to as part of their daily activities. The way in which an upper-caste woman is conditioned in society by the Brahmanical order varies largely from the norms put in place for women belonging to agrarian and menial castes that are lower in terms of caste status.

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[38] Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle, *Manu's code of law: A critical edition and translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005), 588.

[39] Olivelle and Olivelle, *Manu's code of law*, 146.

[40] Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14, (1993): 579–85.

An attempt to understand the intersectionality between caste and gender hierarchy has been made using *Shibsankirtankavya*'s narrative.

The descriptions of the *'Kocch'* women, and Parvati disguised as a *'Bagdini'* woman, provide a sharp contrast to such idealistic patriarchal depictions of women in the *Shibsankirtankavya*. The first ethnographic survey of the region conducted by H.H. Risley sheds light on the nature of the evolution of such lower castes and their representations in popular literature. Shiva's venture into the neighborhood of the *Kocch* is associated with the normality of having multiple sexual partners for men in the early 18th century. An acknowledgement of this fact is necessary in order to understand the portrayal of the *Kocch* as well as Bagdini woman in the narrative and contrast it with the characterisation of the Brahmanical ideals for the role of upper-caste women associated with the goddess Parvati's role throughout the narrative.

Risley emphasises the position of these castes at the lowest rungs of society by associating the *Kocch* community with "a Dravidian tribe of North-eastern and Eastern Bengal, among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood."[41]The *Bagdini* woman, whom the character of Parvati disguises herself as, in order to keep an eye on her unfaithful farmer husband, has its economic roots in the professions of cultivation, fishing, and other menial activities.[42]

The association of the origin of both these castes has been made with the adulterous form of a householder Shiva. The "*Rajbansi*" sub-caste of the *Kochh* community also referred to themselves as "Shivbansi". In explaining the origins of such endogamous sub-categories of the caste, Risley recounts the legend of Lord Shiva's liaison with the daughter of a *Kocch* tribal chief known as *Hira*.[43]

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[41] H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal, vol 1* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), 491. Historians have identified this dichotomy between 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' in the works of Oriental scholarship. Thapar has argued that "The suggested social bifurcation is also remarkably similar; the upper castes were the Aryans and the lower castes were the non-Aryans", See, Romila Thapar, "Ideology and Interpretation of Early Indian History", in *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[42] Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 37.

[43] Ibid., 37.

মুখবিধু দেখ্যা বিধি কর্‍্যা ক্ষয় ।
পুনঃ পুনঃ গঠে তবু তনু নাই হয় ।।
এমত যুবতিগণ পাইয়া চন্দ্রচুড় ।
বেড়িয়া বিহার করে পরম নিগুঢ় ।।
কেহ নাচে কেহ গায় কেহ বায় যন্ত্র ।
কেহ করতালি দেই সবে এক তন্ত্র ।।
কোঁচিনী সকল হইল কুসুম উদ্যান ।
শঙ্কর ভ্রমর তায় মধু করে পান ।।

Mukhobidhu dakhya bidhi koriya khoy ।
Puno puno gothey tobu tonu nayi hoy ।।
Emot jubotigon paiya Chandrachur ।
Beriya bihaar kore porom nigur ।।
Keho naachey keho gaye keho baye jontro ।
Keho korotalin deyi shobe ek tontro ।।
Kochhni shokol hoilo kushum udyan ।
Shonkor bhromor taye modhu korey paan ।।[44]

Looking at his disposition the women gave up all proprieties,
Despite making repeated advances they were not successful in physically attracting Shiva.
On getting the attention of such young and attractive women, Shiva
Engaged in intense lovemaking with them.
Some of them danced while others sang and others played instruments,
Some of them clapped but they were all enchanted in the same way.
The Kochh women were like a flower garden,
Shiva was like a bee consuming their nectar.
[Translation and transliteration by the author]

The depiction of the *Kochh* women is highly sexualised in the above excerpt. The contrast is stark when compared to the way in which Rameshwar depicts the upper-caste women, or women belonging to a higher, more socially respectable caste, as being dutiful and remaining within the confines of the household, through Parvati's character. It would be problematic to project modern categories of 'patriarchy' and 'objectification' onto a period much older than these terms, but it is possible to argue for the sexual vulnerability

[44] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 15-16.

of women belonging to lower castes and classes in society on the basis of the *Shibsankirtankavya*'s narrative. The legends surrounding the origins of the *Bagdi* caste are more insightful from this study's perspective, as their storyline is extremely similar to the part of the *Bagdini* woman included in the *Shibsankirtankavya*'s narrative. The first story is of Parvati disguising herself as a lower-caste fisherwoman in order to seduce Shiva to test his fidelity to herself. Shiva, conforming to the gender role of a typical early modern man, gives in to his temptations.[45]

The narrative of the *Shibsankirtankavya* is the same as Risley's accounts up to this point, after which it takes a completely different direction in order to stick to the larger purpose of the *mangalkavya,* which focuses on agrarian expansion.[46] Parvati's character, disguised as a *Bagdini* in the *Shibsankirtankavya,* refrains from indulging in any sexual activities. In contrast, in Risley's popular legend, Parvati reveals her identity to Shiva who, being piqued by her plan's ingenuity, ordains that the child to be born of their union while Parvati was disguised as a *Badgini* would be the first of a line of *Bagdis*. The normalisation of such instances using the example of a popular and influential deity, such as Shiva, is an indication of the increasing control of upper-caste men over the sexuality of women and thereby the perpetuation of the patrilineality on which the entire Brahmanical socio-moral order was based.

The Hunter's Story: The Assimilation of the Unsettled Groups into a Settled Brahmanical Socio-Moral Order

Several realistic social and moral dilemmas are addressed in these narrative poems through didactic stories that are narrated by Shiva to his wife Parvati during the initial period of their marriage. These stories were individually narrated in order to establish the influence of the worship of Gods—Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti—which represented the popular bhakti traditions prevalent

[45] Ibid., 37.

[46] Parvati, on *Narada's* advice disguises herself as a *Bagdini* woman in order to test her husband's loyalty. Shiva gives in to his temptations and gifts the woman a ring which Parvati later uses to confront her husband's infidelity. Parvati however escapes Shiva's agricultural field and returns to *Kailasha* in the Shibsankirtan's narrative. She doesn't engage in any sexual activities while in disguise. See, Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 259-72.

in Bengal. Not only were these stories confirming the power that these deities had over the events taking place in the human world, but also demonstrated how easy it was for ordinary subjects of the region to worship these deities. The story of the Hunter is one such selection that clearly highlights how the *Shibsankirtankavya* deals with a contemporary social and moral dilemma in the region regarding the administration of the unsettled and hunting-gathering populations within the region. Studies based on the landscape of early modern Rarh Bengal have identified villages and towns interspersed by inland water bodies and forests.[47] Forests were never cut down in their entirety for agrarian expansion, meaning that an entire district often consisted of a diverse population that included agrarian, craft-producing, and hunting-gathering groups.

The production of such literature was also meant to assimilate such a socially diverse population under a common moral order dictated by the Brahmanical authorities. The authority of the *zamindars* over the forested areas was weaker, as it was difficult to regulate such landscapes. The hunter, hailing from the pilgrim centre of Varanasi, is described as a violent, malevolent, and sinful character. The following section highlights this description:

> সর্ব্বদা হিংসক হন দুর্জ্জন দুষ্কৃতি ।।
> খর্ব্ব খল কৃষ্ণবর্ণ তপ্ত তাম্র কেশ ।
> পিঙ্গললোচন পাপী পিশাচের বেশ ।।
> পশুহিংসা সজ্জা তার পরিণপূর্ণ ধাম ।
> বগুরা সল্ল্যাদি কর্য্যা কত লব নাম।।
>
> *Shorboda hingshok hon durjon dushkriti* ||
> *Khorbo khol krishnoborno tapto tamro kesh* |
> *Pingollochon paapi pishacher besh* ||
> *Poshu hingsha shojja tar poripurno dhaam* |
> *Bagura Sholladi korya koto lobo naam* ||[48]
>
> There resided a Hunter,
> Always violent, and a malevolent person,
> Short, shrewd, dark-skinned, dry red hair,

[47] Arthur Geddes, 'The Regions of Bengal', *Geography* 15, no. 3 (1929): 186–98.
[48] Rameswara, *Shib-sankirtan*, 202.

Blood-shot eyes, sinful, demon-like.
Surviving by violently killing animals, he sleeps in a fulfilled pilgrimage city,
He has many malevolent names.
[Translation and transliteration by the author]

One can conclude, then, that the hunters, during the composition of the *Shibsankirtankavya*, could also be part of an urban, non-agricultural milieu. The profession required the hunter to travel extensively, and it was during one such journey that the Hunter accidentally ended up following the norms of the *'Shibratri-pratha'* or the festival of *Shivratri*.

The story, which was being narrated by Shiva to Parvati in the narrative, was preceded by a description of the rituals. The hunter, on his way back from a hunt, was fatigued and fell asleep in a forest. On waking up he realised that the sun had already set and it was difficult for him to find his way back home due to the fear of attacks from wild animals. Seeking refuge, he climbed on a Bael tree after hanging his kill on one of the branches of the same tree. The tree was surrounded by wild animals, and the hunter, plagued by fear and hunger, shivered throughout the night without any sleep. Coincidentally, it was the auspicious night of *Shivratri* and the story was an example used by Shiva to emphasise the significance of the '*tithi*', which is a way of measuring time according to the lunar cycle in Brahmanical traditions. The hunter was fasting the entire night, and most conveniently, there was a *'Shiva-linga'* (a phallic representation of Shiva) situated beneath the tree. The severe cold led to frost melting and falling on the linga while the shivering hunter made the tree shake so violently that the fruits fell as offerings to God Shiva. The poem further states:

স্নান নাই পূজা নাই উপহার শূন্য ।
তবু তিথি মাহাত্ম্যে বহুল হইল পুণ্য ।।

Snaan nai puja nai upohar shunyo |
Tobu Tithi Mahatye bohul hoilo punyo ||[49]

Neither bath nor gifts were offered,

[49] Ibid., 203.

Still, due to the auspiciousness of the tithi more than enough was accomplished.

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

The story continues as the Hunter returns to Varanasi, the imaginary city, and after living a long, healthy life, at the time of his death when 'Y*amraj*' (the God of death) sends his henchmen to collect him, Shiva is suddenly reminded of the way the man had worshipped him and kept a fast on one *Shivratri* night. He sends his soldiers to fight the agents of Yama and rescue the hunter and transport him to his heavenly abode, *Kailasha*. Yama's men are astounded and laugh at hearing that the soldiers had appeared to rescue the hunter. They highlight an important socio-moral dilemma faced by the region in this section by questioning Shiva's soldiers:

জানে নাই জপ পূজা যজ্ঞ দান ব্রত ।
সর্ব্বদা হিংসক সর্ব্বধর্ম্ম বহির্ভূত ।।
এমন অধমে যদি ঈশ্বর উদ্ধারে ।
তবে আর শমন দমন দিবে কারে ।।

Jane nai jop puja jogyo daan broto ।
Shorboda hingshok shorbodhormo bohirbhuto ।।
Emon odhome jodi Ishwar udhhare ।
Tobey ar shomon domon dibey karey ।।[50]

He doesn't know meditation, ritual-worship, offerings, asceticism,
(He is) Forever violent and exempted from all religious faiths.
If Shiva saves such an inferior person,
Then who will the God of death punish?

[Translation and transliteration by the author]

From a historian's perspective, the story reveals two things. First, it shows how accessible religious practices were to all the inhabitants of the region, and the narrative acts as an instructional tool in the same direction. Second, the hunter's story reveals the intention to communicate such socio-moral dilemmas already existing in society. Having to manage and maximise revenue in a space inhabited by a diverse population in terms of class and caste

[50] Ibid., 205.

affiliations, the attempt of the *Shibsankirtankavya* to reach out to the entire population is evident from such texts. The structure of local political settings required it to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with the entirety of the region's population.

The study of the narrative verse is incomplete without contextualising it in the space and time that it was produced in. Such an inquiry into the process of the production and circulation of such literature reveals more about the region's social and economic past than what research based solely on official records has already revealed. The didactic nature of such compositions allows one to look beyond the political events and economic growth of the region, into the shaping of a rural landscape, the demarcation of spaces, and the mundane practices prevalent in society. The *mangalkavya* has been composed in the western part of early modern Bengal, but is clearly a part of a larger corpus of literature, both in terms of time and space, that seeks to perpetuate and validate a distinctly Brahmanical socio-moral order. These *kavya*s were not meant for solely ritualistic purposes, and hence one can find the convergence of varying themes of society, economy, and religion within their narrative. The methodology of this study has attempted to fill some of these gaps while keeping in mind the limitations of using fictional narrative poetry as a source for this purpose. The only way forward, therefore, is the corroboration of the data available in terms of facts relating to economic growth, ecological transformations, as well as political changes within the literary traditions that were not only in circulation across the region but also immensely popular, in order to reveal a holistic picture of the region's past.

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The Seat of Learning Recast: Examining The Archive of the Transformation of Hindoo College to the Presidency College

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The historiographical lacuna in the studies of the functioning of higher educational institutions in the early colonial period has long been a norm in Indian history. Apart from the initial politics of the inauguration of these institutions, their subsequent changes have been almost entirely overlooked in mainstream historiography, which is particularly lamentable in view of the rich state archive that records the functioning of these institutions minutely. One such archival record, which is a collection of official letters dealing with the transformation of Hindoo College in Calcutta into Presidency College, will be critically examined here in order to underline the massive transformations that a mere change of nomenclature entailed, the official rhetoric that concealed larger political suppressions, to recover the voices of the indigenous actors and stakeholders who were involved, and to further identify how particular archival records interacted with the larger policies of the colonial government.

Keywords: Archive, critical reading, education, marginalisation, institutional histories.

Introduction

The archive relating to the colonial government and the affairs of formal educational institutions, especially those of the early colonial period, is quite dense, yet scholastically unanalysed. This scholarly lacuna becomes exceptionally prominent when examined in the context of the Orientalist obsession with 'Native' education. While the establishment of these

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educational institutions is remarked upon in historiography, subsequent transformations are conveniently obfuscated. For example, as per the official colonial sources, the transformation of Hindoo College, Calcutta, into Presidency College is portrayed as an unimportant moment in the educational, political, and economic history of colonial Calcutta, as well as that of India. The contemporary media, as well as the secondary sources which deal exclusively with the history of the Presidency College and the larger educational history of the period, have largely internalised the official narrative and viewed this moment as a mere change in nomenclature and the subsequent creation of the iconic structure of Presidency College on College Street. *The Gazette* has a report of the takeover of Hindoo College on 16th April 1854 and the creation of Presidency College on 23rd June 1855. Both of these reports are quite brief and framed in a bland official tone, projecting nothing but the colonial narrative. An example of a secondary source that can exemplify the aforementioned point is Prithviraj Sen's work, titled *From Hindu College to Presidency University*. However, by critically looking at the primary document chosen here, and contextualising it in the contemporary socio-economic milieu, along with the political ideas and policies of the company state, one can read how crucial this moment is in the larger politics of colonial policies of education.

The primary document in question is a selection from the records of the Bengal Government, consisting of papers relating to the "establishment of the Presidency College", published by the Bengal Military Orphan Press in 1854.[1] These official letters were exchanged between Fred J. Mouat, Secretary to the Council of Education, and Cecil Beadon, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, between the years 1850 and 1854. This particular collection of official letters was published by the government to promote greater transparency within the governmental system, especially in matters dealing directly with the natives. Though the collection was published in Calcutta, the intended audience was not the educated Indian social strata, but Company officials and the general public back in Britain. This document, therefore, demonstrates the official correspondence between two officials of the state and is, thus, clearly a part of the state archives and consequently reflects the dominant voice and perspective of the colonial regime. Through a detailed rereading of the said

[1] F. J. Mouat and Cecil Beadon, *Papers Relating to the Establishment of Presidency College* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1854), Title Page.

archive within the larger historical context, one is allowed to explore the myriad dimensions of contemporary colonial socio-politics, including aspects of colonial educational policy, the colonial construction of religion as a binary to rationality, as well as aspects of and understandings regarding the voices, identities, and representations of all actors—colonial officials, native gentlemanly patrons, and the students of the educational institution.

Background: Politics of 'Native' Education in the Early Colonial Period

One of the first provinces of India to come under the influence of modern English education was Bengal. The question of native education was quite contentious, as seen in the debates between the British individuals who would later be grouped into the Anglicists and the Orientalists. The Act of 1813 created the provision for a substantial annual sum of money being set aside by the colonial state for imparting education to the 'natives.'[2] As it was the Orientalist idea that gained eminence in this period, Bengal saw the establishment of two institutions for higher education: the Mohammedan College or Madrassa, exclusively for Muslim students to study Arabic and Persian forms of education, along with the Sanskrit College meant for the upper-caste Hindu students to access Sanskrit education, following the Orientalist rhetoric. Thus, knowledge and education for the natives were perfectly segregated by the colonial state along religious lines.

Public figures such as Raja Rammohan Roy were staunch critics of this step taken by the Company state, as they demanded a move towards a Western style of education, especially focusing on Western sciences over indigenous education, as they believed that it was the only way that influential Indians—specifically Bengalis—could sustain their influential social position under the aegis of the colonial state. Laxmi Subramaniam further traces this Bengali intellectual movement to the influence of Christian missionary critiques of the Hindu religion, and the Bengali intelligentsia's simultaneous internalisation and resistance to it, which was crucial in shaping the identity of the *bhadralok* (gentlemen).[3] A group of 'liberal-minded' individuals, including both English

[2] Ishita Banerjee Dubey, *A History of Modern India* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 89.

[3] Lakshmi Subramanian, *History of India: 1707 to 1857* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2010), 167.

gentlemen and Bengali landlords, came together for the foundation of the Hindoo College, with the primary aim of imparting western knowledge solely to upper-caste Hindu students. These individuals were compelled to do so, as the Company state—still following Orientalist ideas—refused to sponsor such an institution. Soon, however, the Orientalists started losing popularity, and the ideology of the colonial state regarding education gradually underwent a major change. Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian Education', delivered in 1835, was a watershed moment as, following this, the colonial state progressively began to abandon the Orientalist principles of education in favour of educating Indians through the Anglicist model. Yet for the time being, the government tried to strike a balance between the two systems of education, as evident in the recommendations of the Indian Education Commission of 1882.

Simultaneously, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has pointed out, from the second decade of the nineteenth century, the East India Company was attempting to reduce its costs of governance and inculcate loyalty by employing Indians in subordinate positions of administration, ultimately popularizing the Anglicist form of education while the Orientalist form was slowly rejected.[4] The increasing significance of the Anglicist form of education can be expressed through the statistics of B. N. McCulley, who calculated that, by 1885, the number of English-educated individuals in India amounted to fifty-five thousand, the majority of whom belonged to Bengal.[5] Therefore, the historical moment in question can be seen as a transitional period in which the Company state shifted from patronising Orientalist education to the promotion of an Anglicist form of education, and it is within this context that the said document needs to be examined.

Disdain for "Religious" Education: Vilification of Students from Mohammedan College

Interestingly enough, the first in the series of letters from Mouat to Beadon, does not directly refer to the establishment of Presidency College but opens with a discussion of a problem faced by the Company state:

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[4] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition and After: A History of Modern India* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2020), 193.

[5] B. T. McCully, *English Education and the Origins of Indian Nationalism* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), 187.

> The Council of Education have had their consideration for sometime past the present course of education at the Muhamedan College or Madrissa of Calcutta and the present system under which the Hindoos are exclusively educated at the Hindoo College whilst there is in Calcutta no Government College whatsoever accessible to youths of any class…[6]

The colonial emphasis on the lack of an institution imparting higher education to "youths of any classes" a phrase that implies the secularity of the British, which would always be contrasted against the religiosity of the Indians, is ironic, given that it was the state itself that had preferred and promoted the Oriental form of education.[7] The document then alludes to the department of English (Anglo-Arabic classes) of the Mahomedan College, a report on which had been called upon by the Officiating Under Secretary in 1850. This is followed by a detailed description of the financial resources invested in the department from its inception in 1829 to the present. The endeavor of the Mohammedan College has been presented by the Education Department as an economic and ideological failure on three counts: a low number of enrolled students, only two students having gained junior scholarships, and the fact that students came from economic backgrounds not considered "gentry"—"shopkeepers, retailers, attorneys, and Moonshees"—and not those from the "better class of Mussulmans".

This clearly demonstrates the desired demography of students by the colonial state that had to include the Muslim middle class who were to act as the native collaborators of the state.[8] This also presents a crucial difference between the Missionaries and the Company, as the Missionaries were always eager to work with the underprivileged section of the society, even if it was to convert them, whereas the Company wanted to educate existing Indian elites in the idioms of the English language to create political collaborators and low-level bureaucratic officials. Further, it is not surprising that the Muslim students of the Mohammedan College avoided the English department, because the

[6] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, 1.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 4-8.

teaching of English literature was a form of political indoctrination.[9] The document points out how previous attempts at introducing changes in the Mohammedan College had been strongly resisted by the students: "… a premature attempt to introduce reforms into the Arabic department of the Mudrissa by Dr Spinger on his own authority was forcibly resisted by the Students who broke out in an open rebellion against his authority…"[10] Thus, although there is only a year's gap between the writing of the letter and its publication; the events 'leading up' to the creation of the Hindoo College have been narrativised by the state within the archive.

It is not surprising that education in the English language gains such prominence that the colonial state proposes major reforms for this department. As underlined by Gauri Viswanathan, the introduction of the curriculum of English literature in Bengal was not only a linguistic exercise but also a political one. It was kept completely separate from Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit studies, and the study of the English language was to lead to the internalisation of the superiority of colonial ideas over indigenous ones, as highlighted in the document itself. A report of the English Department of the Madrassa suggests: "It is clearly to be understood that the study of English is in no account to interfere with the established studies of the Institution nor will it ever be admitted as a plea of deficiency in any other branch of study."[11]

This enterprise of the Company state was enjoying its utmost popularity during the time period in question. Students affiliated solely to the English department were required to write essays on social, cultural, religious and political issues. The essays, which were an integral part of the written examination conducted in the English departments of various state-owned and aided institutions in Bengal, were framed in a way which predetermined the response of the examinee such as: "On the Merits of Christianity," "The Effects Upon India of the New Communication With Europe by means of Steam," "The Diffusion of Knowledge through the Medium of English

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[9] Gauri Viswanathan, "Currying Favour: The Politics of British Educational and Cultural Policy in India, 1813-54," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 127-128.

[10] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, 3.

[11] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, ii.

Language in India"—and the students were expected to write exactly what their white examiners demanded.[12] Moreover, English had been completely separated from the Arabic and Persian departments, meaning that the students who chose to study in the English department could not study in the other departments. Therefore, the English department did not merely instruct the native students in English grammar and literature rather acted as a colonial instrument of popularising the merits of colonialism upon the colonised. It has always been important to Indian Muslims, especially Bengali Muslims, to attain sound education in Arabic and Persian traditions, thereby making it impossible for them to abandon them in order to join the English department. The Bengali Muslim community was not incorporated into clerical jobs under the colonial state, unlike the upper-caste Bengali Hindus, thereby removing crucial incentive for the adoption of English education.

However, if one looks beyond the immediate text, the need to simultaneously reduce the significance of the Mohammedan College, increase state control, and redirect government funds towards the Hindoo College can be contextualised in the light of the contemporary social and political scenario. As students from the Mohammedan College and Sanskrit College withdraw themselves from direct contact with the colonial state, students of the Hindoo College—enjoying the twin advantages of their upper-caste identity and sound Western education—were employed in scores as *Kerani* and *chakurijivi* (Clerks), both in government departments and private British firms; thus, making it more worthwhile for the government to invest heavily in nurturing such a crucial class of collaborators. Moreover, intellectual groups like Henry Vivian Derozio's Young Bengal Movement, as Laxmi Subramanian underlines, not only questioned and criticised contemporary Hindu society but also created a distinct Bengali *bhadralok* sensibility. Therefore, during this particular period in time, they were seen by the colonial state as their greatest allies.[13] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, too, argues that as a group, they had complete faith in British rule, Western ideologies, and English education.[14] It is, therefore, not surprising that the government would have sought to invest more resources into an institution which was creating a new Indian economic and political elite, and aimed to control it more directly.

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[12] Viswanathan, "Currying Favour," 127.

[13] Subramaniam, *History of India*, 168.

[14] Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition and After,* 196.

Politics of Voice, Agency and Representation

The dominant voice in the entire document is that of the British colonial officials who held the pen in this case. For the changes proposed in the administration of the Mohammedan College, the voices of any Indian involved with it, in any capacity, are silent. The document itself, however, is forced to refer to these lower-class Muslim students not in reference to the creation of Presidency College and the transfer of the English department, but only in reference to an "uprising" against the white management of the Mohammedan College in 1850.[15] The document alludes this to the abolition of the "religious offices" of *Khuteeb* (Muslim preacher) and *Mouzzim* (Muslim reciter of prayer), and the appointment of Dr Sprenger as Principal and Moulvee Sadududdeen as *Ameen* (Muslim Principal), both of whom were critical of the system of education followed in the institution, "most lax discipline; a system of study regulated entirely by the Mohammedan Professors," as well as of its "superstitions."[16] The colonial obsession with native "superstitions" as the religious other to secular rationality obfuscates the fact that education segregated along religious lines was not a pre-colonial continuity, but an Orientalist creation:

> The influence of superstition too was not wanting to confirm the general alarm in which both professors and students seem equally to have partaken. A person is said to have dreamed that some great calamity was to befall the college and to have urged the professors and the students solemnly to repeat the form of prayer prescribed in the Koran to avert it… To account for the degree to which such an alarm was likely to excite the minds of the professors and students it must be mentioned and borne in mind that for many years past that the Mudrissa had been regarded by them…as a place for the performance for religious observances than as a mere place of secular learning.[17]

The "uprising," as the document calls it, was nothing but peaceful. The document itself says that, at first, the students submitted a petition to the Principal regarding the omission of classical Arabic texts—which were

[15] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, 3.
[16] Ibid., viii-x.
[17] Ibid., ix.

dismissed as "philosophies from dark ages"—from the syllabus, replaced by Urdu texts written by British authors. When their demands were not met, they started to boycott classes.[18] The student body was united, and the management was forced to cede to their demands.

As the document moves from the abolition of the English department in Mohammedan College to the changes proposed for Hindoo College, a subtle change in rhetoric can be observed. While the students of the former establishment are dismissed as "backward," "religious," and "superstitious," the students as well as the management of the latter are praised for being "progressive," "modern," "intelligent," and "rational."[19] As the Hindoo College was established as a collaboration between private British gentlemen and Hindu landlords, it was important for the state to at least record the voices of these landlords, who had provided not only generous funds but invested the initiative with legitimacy among the Bengali *bhadralok,* even though their objections were overridden by the state. Their letters have been presented in the official document verbatim, within quotations. This depiction beguiles the audience and creates a sense of proximity between the speaker and the reader, almost as if the latter is eavesdropping on the former. At the same time, this proximity is nothing but an illusion, as highlighted by Renato Rosaldo. Rosaldo opines that the trope of making voices directly audible to the reader in any context must be examined critically, as it is impossible that the 'data' of direct testimony remains completely untouched by the context of domination, especially when it is written by the wielders of power themselves.[20] Similarly, the background provided by the author in this document shapes the image of the statements in the minds of the readers in a way that is approved by the state.

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[18] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, x.

[19] Ibid., 2,3,4,10,11.

[20] Renato Rosaldo here does not talk about the officials of the colonial state but about more neutral agents of knowledge production, like ethnographers and historians, who similarly present their 'testimonies' verbatim. If their testimonies are so questioned, then the officials of the colonial state, with much more power at their disposal and a greater interest in creating a certain image of the colonised, should be examined even more critically.

Renato Rosaldo, "From the Door of His Tent: The Fieldwork and the Inquisitor," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,* ed. James Clifford and George E Marcus (California: University of California Press, 1986), 79.

There were two important Indian stakeholders: the hereditary governors of the Hindoo College, whose consent would have been theoretically necessary to implement any changes in the administration of the College, although in reality these would be quite easily overridden by the state. In 1850, the hereditary governors were Baboo Prosunno Coomar Tagore and the Maharaja of Burdwan. The former, as the document specifies, attended one of the meetings held on 27th November 1852, where he presented his opinion on the issue at hand. His speech has been paraphrased and possibly shortened in the letter. According to the letter, although he had "no personal objection to the proposed measure, which he deemed in himself to be a good and proper measure", he could not agree to it on the grounds of infringement of the "contract between the Government and founders of college".[21]

The other hereditary governor, the Maharaja of Burdwan, wrote a letter with his opinion on the matter, which has been fully reproduced in the document. He too argues in a way that is quite similar to that of Baboo Prosunno Coomar. He states that he cannot agree to the proposal as it would go against the intent of the founders of the institution and interfere with their monetary arrangements for advancing Western learning among upper-caste Hindu boys. However, he clarifies his personal secular ideas in the following lines:

> Upon principle, I have always thought that any distinction of caste or religion should never be made in a seminary of Education: such distinction is especially unnecessary in a school or college in which no religious doctrines of any kind can be taught. In my English and Bengalee schools at Burdwan, I admit boys of all classes and creeds.[22]

Next, the opinions of the Indian management are recorded, although this is prefaced by the claim that their views are not crucial at all, as their tenure lasts but for a single year. The first opinion recorded is that of Baboo Russomoy Dutt, whose opinion is preceded by a very favourable description of him as an integral part of the management who takes an active interest in the administration of the institution. Dutt, not surprisingly, strongly approves the implementation of the changes proposed by the government. Yet another opinion, again reproduced verbatim, is that of Baboo Ausootosh Dey, who is

[21] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, 22.
[22] Ibid., 23.

described as someone recently elected and who has attended the meetings "only twice." He too objected to the proposal on two grounds. The first, as with anyone else, is that it would infringe upon the agreement between the government and the founders. The second is more revealing:

> However enlightened and liberal may be the views of individual Hindoos, the generality of them, especially the higher classes, with very few exceptions, are very scrupulous, so that they would not willingly place their children to be instructed under the same roof with the children of all castes and creeds; the consequences of throwing open the Hindoo College for the admission of all children without distinction, would be the withdrawal of the majority of present students…[23]

Thus, Baboo Ausootosh highlights a major fear in the minds of both the institutional administration and the government. While the former openly fears such a consequence, the latter does not articulate or record this fear. Nonetheless, this would almost certainly have been a concern for the government as well, as they would not have wanted to alienate the Brown sahibs—a fact demonstrated by the words devoted to showing this objection as invalid. The government, through the document, states that the implementation of the proposed changes will not affect the number of Hindoo students, that it will remain the best institution for the study of English and, therefore, Hindus could not boycott it. It further asserts that the Council had full faith in the "growing intelligence and liberality" of the "Hindoo gentry of Calcutta".[24]

Another important reason why upper-caste Hindu students could not stay away from the institution, which is not noted in the document, was that doing so would jeopardise their job prospects under colonial rule. The primary reason for the council to reject the most recurring oppositions—on the grounds that the contract between the government and the founders of the Hindoo college—is that this contract was deemed legally non-permanent and could be dissolved by either the government or the management at any point of time. In spite of that, the colonial government was eager to retain the semblance of consent from the native founders, acknowledging the financial patronage that

[23] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, 24.

[24] Ibid., 26.

these men extended to the College, thereby reducing the financial burden of the government:

> …It may be conceded that the Government in future throw open the Hindoo College against the will of those who represent the original subscribers, assuming that will be capable of except upon the terms of paying back the aforementioned sum of Rs30000. That done, it appears to the Council that the Government may reorganize the College as he pleases. The only loss to the college which the repayment of the money would cause, is the reduction of so many scholarships.[25]

Examining the aforementioned rhetoric within its discursive context offers valuable insights. The very first commonality among the arguments made by the Indians disagreeing with the government is that, had the decision rested solely with them, they would have agreed to it and gone to some length to prove that they are modern and rational and not steeped in religious orthodoxy. The lengths that these men went to in order to portray themselves as modern can be contextualised in an era where the colonial state saw religion and rationalism as contrasting ideals and would reject any argument coming from a person who would be considered religious, even though the argument in itself is rational. However, the objection on the same grounds, which might have been their own as well, has been blamed on the less progressive of the Bengali *bhadralok*. Moreover, internalisation of colonial ideas and concepts can also be seen in the interchangeable use of the words 'class' and 'caste' and in projecting a *Vidyalaya* (Bengali primary School) as a place where only Hindu students study.

While these men might have quite simply not wanted to give up their connection with the institute completely to the government with no native representation, they, however, had to articulate their objections in terms that would be acceptable to the British, underlying the extremely asymmetrical relationship between the colonial state and its 'collaborators.' To support their objections, they invoke legal terms such as "contract," "impingement," and "agreement," thereby firmly situating the issue in the legal rather than the political context, as it would be the only rhetoric acceptable to the government

[25] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, 22.

even in a situation where Indians are almost being forced to give up the administrative privileges of an institution that they themselves founded for their own upliftment.[26]

Silence of the Students

Another important aspect of this document is the complete absence of students in the official archive. The student body in this context can be categorised into three groups: the upper-class Hindu students of Hindoo College; Muslim students from Mohammedan College who might be interested in English education; and lower-caste students who, again, might be interested in English education. The only mention of the upper-class Hindu students of Hindoo College in the document in question is quite approving and laudatory as the British officers refer to their service to the Empire through *chakri* or low level clerical jobs as service to the Empire itself. Another reference to the same can be found in a particular anecdote recorded in the document. In 1850, a student took admission in the college "representing" himself as the son of the late General Matabir Sing, and he brought in a letter of recommendation. He was duly admitted by the principal, who did not inquire into his parentage. However, Baboo Ausootosh Dey officially addressed a letter to the principal saying that he had reasons to believe that the boy was "unfit for admission" and suggested an inquiry.

An inquiry was duly made and, as the allegation was found to be true, the boy was expelled from the institution. This incident is preceded with the subheading: "Introduction of a Pupil from an Improper Class of Society."[27] Looking at this incident critically, one can rule out the chances of absolute forgery and falsehood, as it would have been quite impossible at a time when social connection among the elite was quite confined, and therefore any or all members of the elite group associated with the College would have known the person being mentioned personally, especially because of the fact that such utter forgery would have been explicitly mentioned in the official documents. Thus, the crux of the matter lies in the subheading under which it was classified: "Introduction of a Pupil from an Improper Class of Society." Analysing it critically in the social context of the time, it is highly probable that

[26] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, 22-25.

[27] Mouat and Beadon, *Papers*, 28.

the boy in question, who does not have a name in the official archive, was perhaps truly the son of General Matabir Sing but an illegitimate one. Perhaps he had been the result of a union between the General and either a city prostitute or a lower-class woman in the city, as it would have been quite impossible for the boy to have gotten the educational background required to apply to Hindoo College if he had been brought up in the village. This would also explain the letter of recommendation that he was able to provide, no doubt written for him by some sympathetic colleague or friend of the General.

The death of the General, although we do not know if it was recent or not, must have thrust both mother (if she was still alive) and son into poverty and desperation, thereby necessitating deception for admission into the institution. Baboo Ausootosh Dey must have been acquainted with either the boy or the mother or, at the very least, must have known about his circumstances with surety, otherwise he could not have written the official letter in such forceful words. Thus, through this anecdote, considered to be trivial enough to "require no discussion in the report," one can find out the mentality and thought processes of the management of the College as well as of the upper-caste Hindu students in that institution, who would have shunned contact with a boy of such background. Although the upper-caste Hindu students of Hindoo College, unlike those of the Sanskrit College, considered themselves to be progressive and liberal, they must have definitely felt uncomfortable at the thought of mingling with fellow students from Muslim and lower-caste communities, not strictly for religious reasons but because that had not been the social norm. Although they advocated progressive politics for themselves and the society that they were living in, their progressive politics only went so far and challenged only a few established social, religious, and cultural norms.

Moreover, many of them belonged to zamindar (wealthy landlords) families from various parts of Bengal where caste laws and religious distance might be strictly regulated, thereby prejudicing the students. In spite of this, there was no serious protest orchestrated by the students, as newspapers of that period reported no such incident. Moreover, there was no legitimate platform for their protest other than popular newspapers of the time like the *Gazette,* as the University Magazine was started much later in 1875 and the vernacular press was still disorganized as it was in its infancy. It must also be noted that there was no real need for protests except during the immediate aftermath of the

complete government takeover of the Hindoo College. The small number of Ashraf Muslims in Calcutta continued to shun educational institutes associated with the colonial government and patronised traditional Arabic and Persian education. Working-class Muslims were never integrated into mainstream English education as there was very little space for their employment in the private and public enterprises owned by the British. Thus, it is of no surprise that these students would have felt alienated and isolated in the educational culture of Presidency College.

The myth of the caste-less *bhadralok* has been challenged, and scholars have demonstrated that students of lower-caste identities in Bengal had to cross many societal and political hurdles to gain access to education.[28] As various historical and literary sources of that period underline, it was almost impossible for an individual belonging to a lower caste to even obtain primary level of education in both rural and urban areas. Moreover, very few of them had the luxury to continue their studies, as most of them belonged to economically marginalised communities, including those of landless labourers, making it almost impossible to reach the point of university education, especially Western education.

Conclusion

The collection of official letters dealing with the creation of Presidency College is an important document as it is a product of the social, political, and economic context of the period. It becomes even more important to study this document, as there is no archive that can act as an alternative to the official one to either contradict or support official colonial claims. Therefore, the idea of native voices in this particular context must be gleaned from this particular document alone. A critical reading of the archive allows for a nuanced understanding of the policies of the colonial government not only in the sector of education in both public and private spheres, but also in the larger political arena. Reading it 'against the grain,' along with contextualising it in contemporary colonial politics, reveals interesting trends and attitudes that the state tries to obscure. Education has always been a sector closely controlled by the state to promote and popularise its ideologies. The grave importance of

[28] Surajit Sinha and Ranjit Banerjee, "Bhadralok and Chhotolok in a Rural Area of West Bengal," *Sociological Bulletin* 18, no. 1 (March 1969): 54.

the document lies in the fact that it portrays a phase of transition in the colonial government's educational politics from Orientalism to Anglicism, which was rooted in changing colonial perspectives of native educational policies ultimately used to sub serve the native rather than stemming from genuine concerns about the problems and struggles of the native student body.

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Feminist Recovery and Re-reading of Historical Knowledge Production

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Conventional recording and interpretation of sources determine what constitutes a major historical event, thereby rendering certain past events and actions inconsequential. One of the dominant methods of historical record-keeping and study is the recovery, analysis, and contextualisation of archival material. Mainstream archives are often perceived and understood as historical facts. The question of women recurs in addressing voices from "below," where emancipation is a process rather than an end, and women are agents rather than mere beneficiaries. The principles of selection and evaluation common to all historiographies align with a pre-fabricated statist perspective. This view of contradiction supports a hierarchised view of gender relations without acknowledging women's agency. To formulate an alternative historiography for those neglected by the mainstream statist perspective of record keeping, merely rewriting is not essential. Nevertheless, the paper argues that understanding the process through which the dominant source was recorded, as well as re-reading and re-interpreting it, is crucial. Reading against the grain or between the lines, especially in the case of prescriptive texts, or examining how myths and narratives evolve in a diachronic context, raises new questions. Thus, it is essential to understand how historical events influence the present and shape contemporary society, as well as how current developments, in turn, reshape our understanding of history and the methodologies we employ to investigate the questions we pose as researchers. This step is significant in the shift away from the hegemonic production of historical knowledge. Therefore, the paper explores what constitutes dominant archives in their formulation, production, and circulation. How does it contextualise the contemporary with respect to the questions of relative visibility and invisibility? In what ways can the neglected be recovered by reading the archives? How is the feminist recovery/re-reading of the past and simultaneous production of historiography and knowledge positioned?

Keywords: Feminist historiography, archives, knowledge production, gender relations.

Introduction: History and Historical "Facts"

"History is always necessarily selective," argues E. H. Carr in his seminal work– *What is History?* The indispensability of the text within historical studies is rooted in its critical insight into the standards deployed by the historian in recording history. Interrogating the framework of objective history and a

positivist approach to studying history, Carr's work questions how the "fact" is manufactured and presented by the historian, who then studies it as a historical fact. Carr argues that the value of these "facts" depends on the vantage point from which they are produced.[1] The historian is placed at the centre of the creation of the historical fact, something that can be shifted, interpreted, and analysed for its relevance and value in association with existing historical knowledge. Likewise, a historian's understanding of the past can never be divorced from the prevailing culture, politics, and ideas of the contemporary. Thus, power relations, prevalent norms, culture, religion, and political beliefs mediate how a historian interprets the past. It is a continuous interaction process between the historian and his facts and a continuous dialogue between the present and the past.[2]

Conventional recording and interpretation of sources determine what constitutes a major historical event, rendering certain past events and actions inconsequential. One of the dominant methods of historical record-keeping and study is the recovery, analysis, and contextualisation of archival material. Mainstream archives are perceived and understood as historical facts. Therefore, it becomes essential to consider what constitutes dominant archives in their formulation, production, and circulation. How do they contextualise the contemporary with respect to the questions of relative visibility and invisibility? In what ways can the neglected be recovered by reading the archives? How is the feminist recovery and re-reading of the past and the simultaneous production of historiography and knowledge get positioned?

Archival Sources: Constructions, Subjectivities, and Relevance

The claims of scientificity and verifiability of historical facts are anchored through credible historical sources and accounts. By objectively observing the past to analyse material remains, the intention is to establish a positivist account of historical research that focuses on the "free individual subject" at times embedded in personal bias and speculation. Contrary to this approach, there has been a shift in the process of undertaking historical analysis of textual evidence where the historical fact or truth is not considered to exist *a-priori* to the observation. Facts need to be placed in context and interpreted, as

[1] E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987).
[2] Ibid.

there is no unmediated past. Hence, it is essential to understand why a historian engages with a particular source, the subsequent observations and interpretations produced, and how these simultaneously shape both the production of historical knowledge and the historian.

In terms of the dominant historical conception, documentary evidence, and sources, archives serve as the repositories of the state. Archives are central and crucial resources produced by the state to establish and legitimise their institutional power and hegemonic control. While the recording of archives is not generally intended for historical production, historians use them for purposes that interest them. Therefore, it becomes essential to understand the processes and contexts in which the production and interpretation of archival material are situated, especially in relation to the questions raised regarding them.

The emergence of law and legislation as a framework for understanding human society has established its authority by recording events in their current form, which are then subsequently separated and placed in another text of sociological importance by the editor. The movement across disciplinary frameworks formulates and positions one's purpose to reclaim historical documents.[3] Ranajit Guha, in *The Small Voice of History*, argues that the ordinary apparatus of historiography, particularly in the context of the reclamation of history, targets powerful institutions and tends to neglect the lower depths and "smaller voices".[4] This dominant historiographical practice fails to distinguish between historical study and the study of statecraft. Guha posits that the application of critical historiography will enable a closer examination of the ground and will bring forth the elements of subaltern life, situating the narratives within a given context. There is a need to cultivate the disposition to understand these voices from "below" and interact with them, as their complexity is unmatched by statist discourse and, in many ways, stand in opposition to its oversimplified modes of operation.[5] This preoccupation

[3] Ranajit Guha, "Chandra's Death," in *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 34–62.

[4] Ranajit Guha, "The Small Voice of History," in *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1–12.

[5] Ibid.

with the statist viewpoint that informed the colonial model is indistinguishable from the standpoint of those who were colonised and later the nationalists.

The questions and issues pertaining to women often highlight the voices from "below", indicating that emancipation is an ongoing process, with women acting as agents rather than just beneficiaries. The principles of selection and evaluation, common to all historiographies, are in consonance with a pre-fabricated statist perspective. Hence, the hierarchised view of contradiction[6] upholds a hierarchised view of gender relations without acknowledging 'women's agency" in the movement. Guha asserts that just the critique of statist discourse does not account for the production of alternative historiography.[7] For that to happen, the critique must move beyond conceptualisation into the next stage—the practice of rewriting that history. It does not mean a simple revision on empirical grounds, but one where historiography is pushed to a point where the instrumentality, the last refuge of elitism, will be interrogated and reassessed not only with respect to women but also to all participants. This idea is central to subaltern studies,[8] where the voice of one group from below will activate and make the voices of other groups audible as well.[9]

Therefore, to formulate an alternative historiography of those neglected by the mainstream statist perspective of record-keeping, rewriting alone is not essential. Nevertheless, understanding the process through which the dominant source is recorded, as well as re-reading and re-interpreting it, is crucial. This step is significant in the shift from the hegemonic production of historical knowledge towards a more contextual and relational reading of history.

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[6] The hierarchised view of contradiction sees contradiction not a single and undifferentiated phenomenon but existing, operating and manifesting at different levels or degrees.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Subaltern Studies emerged around 1982 as a series of journal articles published by Oxford University Press in India. The main aim was to retake history for the underclasses, for the voices that had not been heard previously. Scholars of the subaltern hoped to break away from the histories of the elites and the Eurocentric bias prevalent in imperial history.

[9] Ibid.

Feminist "Recovery" and Interpretation of Archives

Feminist scholars and historians have raised concerns about accommodating feminist methodological frameworks with mainstream historical studies. Janaki Nair, in her work, *The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History*, traces the dominant approaches through which critiques and methods of feminism have been incorporated in the field of history. Despite the presence of a feminist framework of inquiry within the domain of historical study, they have done little to transform its foundational core and the sanctioned ignorance of mainstream academia. Nair argues, "in inverse proportion to the quantum of high-quality writing on Indian history from the standpoint of women is the relative imperviousness of the discipline itself to feminism's insights."[10] The feminist discourse of historical analyses and the subsequent production of alternate historiography are based on the disturbing emphasis on periodisation. However, the work of feminist historians working in close association with mainstream history has been unsuccessful in scrutinising the "disciplinary foundations of history, its thematic orientation, and its periodisation".[11] Thus, a feminist historical analysis may operate on the additive framework of historical investigation without re-conceptualising the same.[12]

Feminist methodological frameworks within history often encounter questions on visibility, hypervisibility through institutionalisation, and isolation in terms of theoretical knowledge production. This contradiction can be seen in the interdisciplinary operations of women's studies and feminist historiography, which have been extensively aided by the Indian state's willingness to nurture, if not absorb, the critical insights of feminism in its programmes, policies, and endowments. In this sense, academic feminism has flourished under conditions that are uniquely Indian, alongside with and often against the power of the Indian state. However, feminist investment in historical analysis is based primarily on the desire to dismantle and alter existing gender hierarchies within the given spatial and temporal dynamics.

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[10] Janaki Nair, "The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no.4 (2008): 57–65, https://doi.org/10.2307/40278103.

[11] Nair, "The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History," p. 58.

[12] Ibid.

The engagement with "women's questions" in history has surfaced in the work of several women historians but this alone cannot be seen as contributing to the feminist framework, historiography, and knowledge production. The uneven relationship of feminist history with mainstream history has raised concerns about the methodological parameters of analysing historical sources and what constitutes the subject of feminist history. Susie Tharu and Tejaswani Niranjana, in *Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender*, assert that mere visibility of discriminated groups can cause deflection of the initiative, with feminists drawn into the dominant culture. They grapple with questions on whose issues are characterised as "women's issues" and who is the target of feminist rage, assisting in understanding the politics of dominance and what constitutes the 'feminist subject.'[13] As Joan Scott eloquently puts it, is gender the appropriate category of analysis in all instances where women are present?[14] Considering gender as the sole category of analysis, that is also discursively constructed, results in an additive enterprise that values the separate worlds of women without questioning the field of power itself. Most historical writing is situated within the additive or contributory model, aiming to grant visibility to another group of women condemned to historical silence by archival absence.

Feminist historiography precedes the feminist rewriting of a "gender-sensitive history" that focuses on society's neglected elements, domains, and communities.[15] This shift in feminist history goes beyond the concerns of colonialists and nationalists, breaking binaries of knowledge production. Although formulating a "gender-sensitive history"[16] may result in some conceptual transformations, if done in isolation without considering the structures of discrimination, it tends to be futile.

Therefore, there is a need to read the intention of historians' writing from a standpoint centred around recording and interpreting "history from below."

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[13] Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," *Social Scientist* 22, no. 3/4 (1994): 93–117, https://doi.org/10.2307/3517624.

[14] Joan W Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," *The American Review,* 91, no.5 (1986): 1053-1075. https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376.

[15] Uma Chakravarti, "Reinscribing the Past: Inserting Women into Indian History," in *Culture and the Making of Identity in Contemporary India*, ed. Kamala Ganesh and Usha Thakkar (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, and London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 202–222.

[16] Chakravarti. "Reinscribing the Past," p.202.

This approach is considered an alternative to mainstream historiography. Can feminist historiographical frameworks be placed within this approach? Subaltern Studies, to some extent, have marked new trends in history writing but have neglected the questions of gender and women. For example, although they emphasised bringing to light the lives and struggles of peasants and tribes, their focus was restricted to men without considering the existence of subalterns within subalterns. Thus, the writing produced within Subaltern Studies was as androcentric as the colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist history.[17]

In their works, scholars such as Anjali Arondekar and Shailaja Paik have outlined means and methods to counter the biases of "official history"[18] produced by archives. Arondekar, in her seminal works on sexuality and archives in colonial India, attempts to shift from the language of loss, recovery, and representation that extensively dictates queer historiography.[19] Her work calls for a move beyond the binding melancholic history of sexuality, "where sexuality's (falsely) pathologised pasts and archives are recuperated and reinstated as sources of sanctuary rather than despair. Sexuality thus endures as an object of historical recovery".[20] Arondekar argues that there exists a relational aspect between the promise of archival presence as future knowledge and historical desire for lost bodies, subjects, and texts, and for the evidentiary models they enable. The work looks at the textual material produced by the *Gomantak Maratha Samaj.*[21] There is an archival abundance contrary to the language of loss that structures the prevalent modes of narration around sexuality. This work formulates a historiography that

[17] Ibid

[18] "Official history" in this context refers to the state-sanctioned dominant and mainstream narrative that are extensively produced and circulated by the government, colonial administration, and hegemonic social groups, in other words history constructed through institutions of power.

[19] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391029.

[20] Anjali Arondekar, "In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia," *differences* 25, no. 3 (2014): 98–122, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2847964.

[21] The *Gomantak Maratha Samaj* is an OBC (Other Backward Caste) community and was established as a formal organisation in 1927 and 1929 in the western states of Goa and Maharashtra. It officially became a charitable institution in 1936 (Arondekar, 2015).

refuses to negate the paradoxes instantiated in the process of self-archiving carried out by the *Samaj*.[22]

In addition to self-archiving, memory and oral history have emerged as substantial methods used by feminist historians to explicitly critique the inadequacies and biases of official and mainstream histories. Shailaja Paik presents a complex narrative of Dalit women's experiences of education through a diverse array of archival sources: newspapers, pamphlets, writings produced by Dalits, their private archives, along with the oral histories of Dalit women.[23] Given the absence of Dalit women from official and mainstream voices, the 'official' records, both colonial and postcolonial, often objectified Dalit women and lacked in-depth information on them. Paik asserts through her work that oral narratives and sources are essential for the history of non-hegemonic groups, as the ruling classes have had control over writing and left behind much more abundant written records. Hence, oral history is crucial for engaging with Dalit women's understanding of their history and to write a richer and more multi-layered account of their lives.[24]

Archival and textual sources, whether religious, cultural, social, or related to the political economy, are products of a knowledge system that is highly dominant and hierarchical. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the various methods and distinct methodological frameworks employed by scholars aiming to challenge the dominance of archives as repositories of the state. Lastly, some of the questions that emerge and are necessary to engage with during archival recovery and interpretation are: What is considered an archive? Do other recorded materials and narratives, such as oral traditions and embodied practices, receive the same legitimacy as archives? In what ways is the formulation of alternative historiography, particularly feminist history, positioned in relation to the mainstream discourse of history?

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[22] The *Samaj's* archive (housed in Panaji and Bombay) constitutes an efflorescence of information in Marathi, Konkani, and Portuguese, ranging from minutes of meetings, journals, newsletters, private correspondence, flyers, and programs, all filled with details of the daily exigencies and crises that concerned the community (Arondekar, 2015).

[23] Shailaja Paik, "Introduction: Education for the Oppressed," in *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (London: Routledge, 2014), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770741.

[24] Ibid.

Conclusion

Although they are repositories of the state, archival and written records have emerged as essential historical sources. Archives, as a colonial enterprise, are "not inert repositories; they are self-conscious products of political and institutional projects".[25] This underscores the constructed and intentional nature of archives as shaped by the priorities and anxieties of those in positions of power and hegemony.[26] The shift towards viewing history from "below" through the emergence of subaltern studies and the advent of feminist historiography has been significant in developing counter-narratives and alternative historical readings and interpretations. However, the essence of such intervention often remains limited to integrating groups and narratives into mainstream accounts of history that have been rendered invisible.

This approach provides visibility, sometimes resulting in the hypervisibility of certain marginalised groups without questioning the underlying power relations and hegemonic structures in place. It does not entirely reject the archival sources produced by those in power but complicates the implications of archival mediations. Reading against the grain or between the lines, particularly in the case of prescriptive texts, or examining how myths and narratives evolve in a diachronic context, raises new questions. Thus, it is essential to understand how historical events influence the present and shape contemporary society as well as how current developments, in turn, reshape our understanding of history and the methodologies we employ to investigate the questions we pose as researchers.

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[25] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 20, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400835478.

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The Archive in Leopold von Ranke, Ranajit Guha, and Ann Laura Stoler: An Essay in Method[1]

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This brief essay makes a comparative intervention into the nature and praxis of historiography as found in Leopold von Ranke, Ranajit Guha, and Ann Laura Stoler. As I address it, one can find significant continuities and departures within interrelated questions of the historian's objective in the archive and their engagement with archival material within the conceptual worlds of Ranke, Guha, and Stoler. By attending to the praxis of reading along and against the archival grain, the essay attempts to connect the theoretical positions of these thinkers and trace these transitions in historiographic practice.

Keywords: Archives, colonialism, historiography, Leopold von Ranke, Ranajit Guha, Ann Laura Stoler

Reading *along* and *against* the grain of an archival document

The concept of reading *along* and *against* the grain comes from the notion of texts as *textiles* into which facts, ideas, and ideological networks are woven together. Reading along the grain involves setting aside a predetermined set of assumptions and letting primary sources speak for themselves. Ann Laura Stoler (2008) asserts that colonial scholars who solely read against the grain by selecting and sieving information from the archives bring preconceived ideas to the documents, assuming that the "grand narratives of colonialism" already have been told.[2] While examining colonial archives as sites of "command" as well as "countermand," Stoler makes the case that a careful reading of the archives along its grain contradicts this. Instead, these are the sites of contested knowledge, rumours turned into fact, shifting notions of governance and

[1] Based on an essay written for HS 861: *Advanced Course on Historiography* (Spring 2024) as part of my MA Research coursework.

[2] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 50.

order, future imaginings, and sentiments.[3] Stoler's idea of the archive further entails the notion of attending to the several force fields that occupy it, and, in this vein, addresses "the archive's granular rather than seamless texture."[4] To arrive at a comprehensive picture of it, one can return to the practice of reading *along* the archival grain to avoid the risks of arriving at predetermined, foregone conclusions, for instance, oversimplifying the colonial narrative. Thus, the act of reading along the grain does not signify a "frictionless" practice but entails the possibility of attending to "both the sound and sense" of the archive and their "rival and reciprocal energies."[5]

On the other hand, reading *against* the archival grain entails a practice of attending to several gaps that a linear and uniform set of sources can pose. As a practice of "resistant reading" gaining currency with the revisionist feminist work of Judith Fetterley (1978), reading *against* the grain posits alternative perspectives that differ from apparent textual meanings, challenging and deconstructing the dominant position that the text appears to offer at its surface. An example of this can be Ranajit Guha's (1983) "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," where Guha describes the corpus of historical writings on peasant insurgency in colonial India through three types of discourse—primary, secondary, and tertiary—each differentiated from the other two by "the degree of its formal and/or acknowledged identification with an official point of view."[6] A reading *against* the archival grain, therefore, aims to deconstruct dominant cultural biases within the text of the primary source itself. Thus, a reading that blends both these practices in a meaningful and balanced way, without excessively verging on their own inherent conceptual biases, can offer useful resources to understand and arrive at a broader apparatus of a specific moment in time.

The "archival turn" in Stoler

Both the practices of reading *along* and *against* the grain come with an import of close textual reading: the former having an openness to know from the

[3] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 50.

[4] Ibid., 53.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," In *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 48.

archive - to "disrupt" the archive and not to "annex" it, in Arlette Farge's phrase, while the latter attending to alternative ways of addressing an archival document to deconstruct its biases and its associated cultural politics.[7] The archival turn in Stoler comes with its central focus on the "archive as subject" rather than the "archive as source."[8] Stoler develops this argument by addressing the archival primary source beyond a certain set of preconditioned assumptions: drawing one's sensibilities to "the archive's granular rather than seamless texture, to the rough surface that mottles its hue and shapes its form."[9] In her section on "Archival Conventions," Stoler inserts an epigraph by Farge where one encounters the concept of the archive as "an adversary to fight."[10] Thus, a sense of surrendering to archival material without a set of foregone conclusions underwrites Stoler's premise of the "archival turn". What characterizes the turn in Stoler is also a focus on addressing the "frail conceit of the panoptic glare."[11] The archival turn in Stoler attends to the facade of the "archive's repetitions, formulae, and obviousness," of the "fixed formats, empty phrases, and racial clichés" characterized by a "limpid prose and numbing dullness."[12] Thus, in attempting to deconstruct the official gaze without being clouded by a set of pre-existing ideas, Stoler's practice necessitates an ethnography of the archive itself by addressing the processes that go into making the archives rather than having the archive as a finished product by itself. By locating the ways in which sources are made, Stoler's archival turn looks at how documents viewed by state officials are "not always produced by them," and she uses the instance of the Dutch colonial "archives which were "both a corpus of statements and a depot of documents, both sites of the imaginary and institutions that fashioned histories as they concealed, revealed, and contradicted the investments of the state."[13] It is within these "constricted" ontologies of rule, Stoler argues, that understandings of outrage escape the "reasoned state."[14] By addressing the several voices that constitute

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[7] Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), quoted in Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 23.

[8] Stoler, Along *the Archival Grain,* 44.

[9] Ibid., 53.

[10] Ibid., 23.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain,* 49.

[14] Ibid., 21.

the archive, Stoler's conceptual turn overturns the dominant notion of the archive as a singular monolithic body of documents solely produced by the state and renders the definition of the archive more nuanced.

Comparing Ranke's approach to historical archives to those of Guha and Stoler

The approach to archives as found in Guha and Stoler have significant continuities and departures with each other and with that of Leopold von Ranke's nineteenth-century theorizations on historiographic practice. To move towards a comparative reading of these three practices requires a working definition of the archive that underwrites the work of the three scholars across time. The archive in Ranke, Guha and Stoler is unambiguously constituted by the primary sources that inform history writing. Assessing the Rankean notion of history writing, K R Eskildsen (2008) writes of the "heroization" of archival experience that it entails, and that post-Ranke, historians learned "to consider history as a history of documents" with "its preference for the written word."[15] Eskildsen further cites an "1841 critical observer" from the left-Hegelian journal *Hallische Jahrbucher*, who "noted the formation of a Rankean school based upon archival research."[16] He commented, "Only within [the archive], [Ranke] thinks one can find *thorough and secure knowledge*; only from these, one can learn the true and original interrelationship between the events and their ultimate causes."[17] In Guha, the colonial archive is defined in a specific manner: the "primary sources," central to the "profession" of history, from which one can move towards subaltern historiography is constituted by "despatches, counter-insurgency operations, departmental minutes on measures to deal with a still active insurrection and reports of investigation into some of the more important cases of unrest."[18] Further, in Stoler, the archive is treated as a "subject" in itself than a "source," that is, the archive is addressed as a living, textured and active entity in itself, rather than a monolithic repository which comes to life only with the historian's encounter. In this way, Stoler's archive is defined on slightly

[15] Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn: Location and Evidence in Modern Historiography," *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no.3 (November 2008): 453.

[16] Ibid., 433.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Guha, "Counter-Insurgency," 2.

different terms than that of Jules Michelet, where the nineteenth-century French historian's "excitement" resided in "the fantasy that dust-covered archival boxes were a point of entry to actual French lives, the ghostly remains, of those whose traces were entombed in the archival sepulchre."[19] In the conceptual worlds of these three works of Ranke, Guha and Stoler, one can find some continuities in the idea of objectivity of the historian in the archive. However, the question of engaging with archival material differs significantly in each of them. In Ranke's positivist-informed notion of history as a factual discipline cognate with the natural sciences, but also having a poetic import to it, the historian is nonetheless supposed to be without a subjective bias while attending to facts. There is a certain emphasis on truth, attributing a sense of causality to ultimate truth, and thus, cognate with the contemporary cultural impulse of the early nineteenth century that was underwritten by the intersections of religion and scientific developments. In *The Theory and Practice of History,* Ranke writes that a "documentary, penetrating, profound study" is necessary, devoted to the "phenomenon itself," then, "to its essence" and a "spiritual apperception."[20] This sheds light on the relationship between events that constitute primary sources. Guha and Stoler primarily share the idea of the interrelationships that shape events, archives and histories. In Guha, the peasant consciousness is embedded in the prose of the state records, at times strict bureaucratese, in a way that a reading *against* the grain sheds light on the several ways in which events are connected and shaped by each other. One can look at the two early letters from the 1831 Barasat uprising and the 1855 Santhal rebellion that he reads in his "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency": attending to the linguistic registers that speak of how urgent bureaucratese differs from a slow and sustained communication between officers. Further, in Stoler, the idea of the archive having a multiplicity of people's voices than the singular voice of the state apparatus resonates both with that of Ranke's argument of causality and Guha's notion of the indices of subaltern consciousness in elite discourse. Stoler writes of what goes into the making of the archive by looking at "archival asides": "lowly civil servants gone bankrupt in efforts to pay for their sons' requisite schooling in Holland," "abbreviated asides impoverished widows of lowly Dutch officials send[ing]

[19] Francis X Blouin and William G Rosenberg, Processing *the Past* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.

[20] Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 39.

their servants to beg from their neighbours for food and funds on their behalf," "Dutch administrators, as well as German and French planters scrambling to figure out whether their plantation holdings might be attacked by a few workers bent on revenge against an abusive planter, or by "phantasmic hoards of Islamic insurgents armed to storm their guarded gates."[21] The focus is thus again on the causality of events that surface in several ways in the archive.

However, one can trace certain departures here. In Ranke's primary source-based notion of history writing, the question of interpretation is not acknowledged as prominently as an inquiry into human sciences would necessitate. Both in Guha and specifically Stoler, the question of the historian engaging with the material in the archive is taken up. Both scholars moreover use the notion of the archive as a sartorial entity within which the historian's interpretive engagement unfolds. While Guha writes of having a "close look at its constituting elements and examines those cuts, seams and stitches—those cobbling marks—which tell us about the material it is made of and the manner of its absorption into the fabric of writing." Stoler assesses the archives along the lines of reading *along* a grain.[22] The focus is on what centrally constitutes the archival source and what is relegated to the margins of historical knowledge. A closer look at the work of the three scholars each having similarities and divergences from each other can give important frameworks not only to understand and write about archives but also to trace the changing practices of history writing and the theorizations that accompany them.

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[21] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain,* 21.

[22] Ibid., 3.

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Hazrat Mahal and the Many Archives: A Comparative Review

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This review examines two recent books on Begum Hazrat Mahal. The first, authored by Rudrangshu Mukherjee, delves into the lives of Hazrat Mahal and Laxmibai, exploring themes such as historical memory, amnesia, and the hierarchies of heroes within colonial and nationalist narratives. The second, by Sudipta Mitra, offers a narrative history of Hazrat Mahal and her husband, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. The essay advocates a dialogue between Mukherjee's emphasis on historical objectivity and the colonial archive, and Mitra's focus on indigenous archival sources, popular belief, and memory, emphasising the need for a more inclusive approach to women's historical representation.

Keywords: Revolt of 1857, feminist historiography, women's representation, colonial archive, Begum Hazrat Mahal.

Begum Hazrat Mahal is a popular figure in the historiography of the Indian Revolt of 1857. Known as a wife, mother, and queen-regent of the Indo-Persian Awadh dynasty (1722-1856) in North India, Hazrat Mahal has garnered much scholarly attention in the past decade for her participation in the revolt. The following essay reviews two books on Hazrat Mahal: one by the eminent historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee, and another by Sudipta Mitra, an independent researcher.

Rudrangshu Mukherjee's *A Begum & A Rani* (2021) discusses the life, origins, and participation of two queens of 19th-century North India—Hazrat Mahal and Laxmibai, who participated in the revolt of 1857. Through these figures, Mukherjee explores broader themes about the colonial archive, historical memory, and amnesia. He raises a significant question about how to write history when only the victor's account remains. Drawing from historians S.B. Chaudhari (1957) and Ranajit Guha (1983), Mukherjee's answer to this question is an exploration of the "genuineness" and "rebel consciousness" that

emerge from a critical reading of the colonial archive.[1] Regarding the protagonists of his book, Mukherjee argues that the act of remembering Laxmibai has inevitably necessitated the forgetting of Hazrat Mahal,[2] where the former has acquired far greater importance than her actual participation, and the latter has not been given her due in the roll call of history. He points out that this 'hierarchy of heroes' has primarily resulted from Indian scholars' dependence on colonial accounts of the revolt, where Laxmibai was more visible than Hazrat Mahal.[3] Not only was Laxmibai sighted by several British officers and soldiers on the field, she was also already a familiar figure in the politics of Jhansi (albeit written through the male gaze), and thus was known and recognised by British men, adding to her visibility even more in post-colonial India. In contrast, while dismissing the misconception that Hazrat Mahal was restricted by purdah (an argument put forth by Abdul Halim Sharar in *Guzishta Lucknow* [1926]),[4] Mukherjee agrees that there was no record of Hazrat Mahal on the field, and this resulted in her absence in historical writings.

Mukherjee also points out that the difference in how Laxmibai's and Hazrat Mahal's participation in the revolt ended could have influenced their memorialisation. While Laxmibai faced a soldier's death, Hazrat Mahal's flight and ultimate refuge in Nepal did not pass the test of a nationalist ideology "that privileged the explicit and outward show of valour" in its search for 'inspirational exemplars.'[5] However, Mukherjee does not assert that Laxmibai's choice over Hazrat Mahal was premeditated and deliberately prejudiced. Drawing from Gyanendra Pandey (2013), he suggests looking at it as common sense or the "natural order of things" that governed the nationalist quest for heroes in the historical record.[6]

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[1] Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *A Begum & A Rani: Hazrat Mahal and Lakshmibai in 1857* (Gurugram: Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2021), xxi-xxii.

[2] Ibid., xvii.

[3] Ibid., 130.

[4] Abdul Halim Sharar, *Guzishta Lucknow; or, Lucknow: Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, ed. and trans. E. H. Husain (London: Paul Elek, 1975), 66.

[5] Ibid., 135.

[6] Mukherjee, *A Begum & A Rani*, 136.

Mukherjee has authored a valuable book in a style that has become characteristic of his writing—laden with important facts, details, and a rich appendix. Writing about Laxmibai, Mukherjee focuses on separating fact from fiction, threading out aspects of Laxmibai's memorialisation that tend to become devotional. He details how Laxmibai was a late and reluctant entrant to the revolt and that she too 'fled' from her post—aspects often erased in her valorisation. Despite citing the limitations of sources on Hazrat Mahal, Mukherjee makes a strong argument about her role in the revolt, presenting a critical analysis of Hazrat Mahal's counter-proclamation to illuminate her political and military prowess. He highlights some factors, such as Hazrat Mahal's slave descent, her familial association with courtesans, and her separation from Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, which deserve credit as these facts are often glossed over in historical accounts.

Mukherjee's search for documents on Hazrat Mahal can be enriched by a more substantial engagement with primary and secondary sources produced in indigenous languages. For example, Amritlal Nagar (1957) has written numerous texts in Hindi on the revolt—citing Mufti Intezamullah Shihabi's *Begamat Awadh ke Khatut* (1948), which is a reproduction of the correspondence between several begums of Awadh and Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (r. 1847-1856) in Urdu.[7] These letters detail Hazrat Mahal's presence on the battlefield and may help in complicating the perception of her physical absence from the scenes of the revolt. Similarly, several facts regarding Hazrat Mahal's life and the accompanying archival sources were well-documented by historians writing in Urdu in the early 21st century, such as Nusrat Naheed (2001) and Wasim Ahmad Saeed (2006), and can be added to the discussion.

Furthermore, while it is true that Laxmibai was the focus of many early nationalist and post-independence centenary writings, Hazrat Mahal was also written about in the post-1950s—for example, in the works of Iqbal B. Devsare (1973) and Surendra Kant (1989), which were mainly published by state government departments. These works can be reviewed alongside works on Laxmibai that emerged in the same period to trace the differences and similarities in the representation of women. Nevertheless, Mukherjee's book

[7] Amritlal Nagar, *Gadar ke Phool* (Lucknow: Suchna Vibhag, 1957), 262.

is one of the first academic engagements that explores why Hazrat Mahal's historical remembrance has been so starkly different from Rani Laxmibai's, offering a significant, expert perspective for historians to consider.

Sudipta Mitra's *A Nawab and a Begum* (2024) presents a more narrativised history of Hazrat Mahal and Wajid Ali Shah, drawing from a rich array of sources, including colonial reports, indigenous accounts, newspapers, manuscripts, and several secondary writings of significance. Through its dual biographical structure, the book skilfully attempts to document the "enigmatic relationship between the couple," presenting their simultaneous, often overlapping, but radically different responses to Awadh's annexation and the ensuing revolt.[8] It presents a microcosmic account, emphasising the historical significance of examining the interconnectedness of personal and political lives in the backdrop of colonialism. One of the most substantial contributions of the book is Mitra's attempt to write about Hazrat Mahal's life after the revolt, a theme rarely touched upon by historians, including Mukherjee.

Mitra explores the year-long journey that Hazrat Mahal undertook in the terai (lowland) region bordering Awadh and Nepal, her interactions with Nepal's Prime Minister Jung Bahadur, and ultimately, the negotiations she made to seek asylum in Nepal.[9] These details enrich our understanding of Hazrat Mahal's later years, offering a fresh perspective on her life and legacy, and can be potentially examined beyond the trope of women's helpless victimhood. Mitra's effort to centre Hazrat Mahal in the narrative is a significant historical project, but at times, the narrative leans towards idealisation.[10] However, the complexities of Hazrat Mahal's identity and political agency could be investigated further. She often seems to get lost in the rich details of the revolt, appearing in short spurts, repeatedly through the lens of Mammu Khan—her advisor and confidant.[11] These appearances are sometimes couched in speculation (beginning with 'Hazrat Mahal most likely…') and would benefit from more robust citation of primary sources. Despite this, the book's

[8] Sudipta Mitra, *A Nawab and a Begum* (New Delhi: Rupa Publication India, 2024), xvi.
[9] Mitra, *A Nawab and a Begum*, 204-218.
[10] Ibid., 15, 35.
[11] Ibid., 127.

accessible language and focus on lesser-known aspects of Hazrat Mahal's life make it a valuable addition to the literature on the subject.

In a way, Mitra's book offers to complete the narrative of Hazrat Mahal's extraordinary life and heroic death in order to match the way Rani Laxmibai's story has been told—as more composite, precise, and linear. Thus, it is a project that is starkly different from Mukherjee's. Nonetheless, Mukherjee's historical objectivity and focus on the colonial archive, and Mitra's exploration of indigenous archival sources, popular belief, memory, and myths are equally valuable in studying Hazrat Mahal. They prompt significant historical questions: how has Hazrat Mahal been resurrected and represented in contemporary times? What are the underlying tropes that govern her historical writing and memorialisation? And how can one approach historical memory? Both books encourage the reader to reflect not only on why it is important to retrieve Hazrat Mahal from historical amnesia, but also on the act of retrieval itself, precisely to what is being lost during this process.

What may strengthen future research on this subject is a feminist engagement with history-writing and the archive, to draw attention to (a) the prerequisites of women's visibility in history, (b) the methods that historians can employ to retrieve lost subjects of history, and (c) a sustained discussion of what constitutes the archive itself. While Mukherjee mentions Ruby Lal's conceptualization of women's "playfulness" to talk about Laxmibai and Hazrat Mahal's politics,[12] her insights into how one can write or read history where there is no recovery, or where the subject is not apparent, can open new avenues of inquiry.[13] Through such an approach, the oft-commented-upon 'mystery' of Hazrat Mahal's invisibility may be solved.

As scholars of women's history argue, it is pertinent to re-examine the entire analytical and epistemological apparatus of the traditional archive and the seemingly gender-neutral methodologies. In the absence of such an academic exercise an attempt to retrieve women's agency remains merely an act of 'adding' women to an already established, universalized (and masculinized)

[12] Mukherjee, *A Begum & A Rani*, 137.

[13] Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 58-60.

history.[14] Numerous scholars, such as D. Fairchild Ruggles (2000), Barbara Metcalf (2011), Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (2015), Susan Broomhall (2018), and others, have explored archives of emotions, orality, living histories, and memory in writing about women. They contend that informal, personal writings—letters, diaries, manuals, poems—as well as non-textual evidence such as art, architecture, coins, clothing, and courtly mannerisms, practices of piety, and travel et cetera, must be treated as significant sites for gendered historical inquiry that allow us to consider women's "self-in-performance" in society.[15] That is, to understand how women performed their gendered identities in the public-private domain by reiterating, expanding, or subverting the socio-political institutions and ideologies of their times.

Hazrat Mahal's courtly rituals and mannerisms, particularly her act of granting titles and gift-giving during the revolt, as recorded in several indigenous accounts like that of Kamal-ud-Din Haidar (1879), can be read as a site of her self-assertion.[16] Her painting in Wajid Ali Shah's *Ishqnama* (1848-9) can substantiate scholarly claims of her African descent and courtesan past.[17] Her letters of correspondence to British officials posted in Lucknow after the annexation of Awadh in 1856, reproduced in Rizvi and Bhargava (1957), can complicate the perception that she held anti-colonial sentiments from the beginning.[18] Lastly, her architectural endeavours in Nepal challenge the conception of her miserable life in exile, which is essential to the narrative of her sacrifice and bravery.[19]

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[14] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 1989), 3.

[15] Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

[16] Tanya Burman, "Begum Hazrat Mahal and the Revolt of 1857: Some Reflections on Women's 'Self-Representation' in Politics," *Women's Link* 30, no. 1 (January 2023): 86.

[17] Rosie Lewellyn-Jones, *The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah, 1822-1887* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 136.

[18] Tanya Burman, "Begum Hazrat Mahal: Power, Politics, and Representation in the Revolt of 1857" (PhD dissertation, Ambedkar University Delhi, New Delhi, 2024), 197, Shodhganga@INFLIBNET: Begum Hazrat Mahal Power Politics and Representation in the Revolt of 1857 (accessed 7 June 2025).

[19] Ibid., 300-1.

While Mitra believes that the controversies surrounding "the queen's murky past" should be "shelved,"[20] an inquiry that does not attempt to sanitise Hazrat Mahal's retrieval may be fruitful in presenting a richer account of the past. We could explore Hazrat Mahal's participation alongside the complexities, intersections, and liminalities that shaped her life and agency. Perhaps then we could move beyond comparisons—whether to her husband or to a woman with whom she never crossed paths—to write the history of Hazrat Mahal.

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[20] Mitra, *A Nawab and a Begum*, 230.

Kesari: Colonialism, Martyrdom and Nationalism

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This film review attempts to analyse the 2019 commercial chartbuster Kesari, an emotionally compelling war drama based on the events of the Battle of Saragarhi (1897). The movie was endorsed as an ode to Sikh martial values, painting a political conflict with predominantly religious overtones, while also being careful to make scattered mentions of syncretism. This review will examine how the movie can be seen as echoing the values of martyrdom and sacrifice for the nation within the larger contemporary milieu of a newfound emphasis on nationalist values.

Keywords: Kesari, war drama, Battle of Saragarhi, 36th Sikh Regiment, martyrdom, Sikh identity, Khalsa.

Since the past few decades, our socio-political order has been at an inflection point, bearing witness to a sustained rise in hyper-nationalism. Accordingly, Anurag Singh's *Kesari* is a cinematic celebration of "valour, bravery, and all those patriotic hashtag terms guiding Indian filmmakers since 2014".[1] The film attempts an in-depth depiction of the Battle of Saragarhi, a prominent narrative in popular Sikh memory of martyrdom, seen as one of the greatest 'last-stands' in military history. The fort had operated as an interim signal for post for the 36th Sikh Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J Haughton in order to maintain the flow of communication between Fort Gulistan and Fort Lockhart on Samana Ridge during the Tiraha Campaign to quell the uprising in the North West Frontier Province (now in Pakistan).[2] The battle was fought on 12th September 1897 between 21 Sikh soldiers of the 36th Sikh

[1] Rahul Desai, "A Film That Is To History What War Is To Peace", *Film Companion*, March 21, 2019, https://www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/kesari-is-to-history-what-war-is-to-peace.

[2] Bikram Lamba, *Battle of Saragarhi Provides Some Excellent Lessons*, WordPress, n.d., 2022, 1, accessed June 16, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/86535751/Battle_of_Saragarhi_Provides_Some_Excellent_Lessons.

regiment and over 10,000 Afghan soldiers, during which the former managed to hold the fort for almost six hours.

In the words of Rahul Desai, the film "feeds the bloodthirst of 2019 by positioning the blood spilled in 1897". It is preceded by a shot of the Indian Government's Ministry of Home Affairs website titled '*Bharat ke veer* - dedicated to all the martyrs". The opening shot involves a narration sequence of the establishment of Ranjit Singh's empire in the 19th century, which is depicted as being established by "driving away the Afghans" (*Afghano ko bhagakar*). It depicts the coterie of Afghan *amirs* as a constantly pestering element attempting to capture the north-western region of *Bharat*.[3] This establishes the *longue durée* of the region as a landscape in turmoil within the first few minutes. It then goes on to show how the Anglo-Afghan conflict necessitated British reliance on Sikhs to tackle Afghans, as they were part of the only group that had successfully dealt with them in the past.

Within one year of the annexation of the Sikh state in 1849, Sikhs were being actively recruited into the East India Company's army, and the officers who had just fought the Sikhs "insisted on the Sikh recruits being *kesadhari*": only those Sikhs who looked like Sikhs were to be enrolled. This can be located within the broader colonial epistemology of constructing certain native ethnic groups as 'martial races'. It is well known that by the 18th century, Sikh warriors often chose a Khalsa identity, and it was principally as soldiers that Persian and British authors encountered these disciples of the Guru.[4] Unlike many of their conquered subjects who struck the British as superstitious and effeminate, the Sikhs were considered brave.[5] In the words of Captain R. W. Falcon, a Sikh was "manly in his warlike creed, in his love of sports and in being a true son of the soil; a buffalo, not quick in understanding, but brave, strong and true".[6]The movie also plays on the trope of the land as beloved, with the last shot of one sapling growing in an agricultural field feeding into

[3] The use of the term "*Bharat*" in the narration aligns with the rekindling of the nationalist debate around renaming the nation.

[4] Louis E. Fenech, "Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no.4 (October-December 1997): 624.

[5] Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 209.

[6] Captain R.W. Falcon, *Handbook On Sikhs: for the use of Regimental Officers* (Allahabad: The Pioneer Press, 1896), 1.

the construction of *Punjabiyat* as being largely associated with agrarian imaginations.

The initial shot of the movie introduces the protagonist, havaldar (constable) Ishar Singh, explaining the conflict between the Pathans and the British over Afghanistan to his colleague at the Samana Range. The doting simile used for this illustrated *'gora sahab'* (British) as the husband, and Afghanistan as the *'biwi'* (wife), follows along the classical trope of feminising the opponent in a conflict, while also acknowledging that the native soldiers, specifically the Sikhs, were mere pawns in a tussle from which they had nothing to gain. The movie portrays the Afghans as inherently rugged and barbarous, chanting religious slogans while beheading a woman, representing their utter brutality. It plays on the classical trope of Sikh soldiers saving a woman and protecting her from men of her own community. This narrative is drawn from the colonial discourse in which white men saw themselves as "saving brown women from brown men", as noted by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?".[7]

There are several depictions of rampant racism within British troops against native soldiers. The protagonist's transfer to Saragarhi, understood to be a punishment posting, is also depicted as a symbolic humiliation at the hands of a British superior. It is historically established that Post-1857, Punjab had, to all intents and purposes, become "the garrison province of the Raj: not only was it home to the bulk of the soldiers of the Indian Army, resources were also generously expended for military purposes".[8] The colonial stereotyping of classifying certain communities as "martial" and others as effeminate established a dichotomy that persists in modern constructions of identity through "the process of radicalisation and gendering".[9] With heavy use of religious symbolism associated with the Khalsa and multiple sequences of religious war cries, the film heightens the valiant representation of Khalsa Sikhs. The war sequence has the background score of one of the most widely

[7] Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty, "Can The Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Carry Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 93.

[8] Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849-1947* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 20.

[9] Vishal Sangu, "Lost in Translation: How Colonialism Shaped Modern Sikh," *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 24 (2023): 126.

quoted hymns of Guru Gobind Singh: *"deh shiva var mohe,"* which is seen as speaking of the spiritual battle within oneself. The movie serves as a rousing statement of heroic endurance and bravery, which continues to feed into the Sikh identity as well as the larger nationalist construction. This version of nation-building, along the lines of religious hyper-nationalism, "is directly dependent upon religious antagonism or on the construction of fundamental orientations through opposition to the 'Other'."[10]

A major historical loophole in the narrative is the painting of the Mughals and British in the same light as foreign exploiters, remaining completely ignorant of the intricacies of colonial rule. The film "features a proto-freedom fighter taking on a proto-Taliban force."[11] Throughout an explicitly detailed depiction of the battle, the umpteen number of Afghan soldiers are shown using unethical methods of attack in the name of jihad (religious warfare), and displaying hostility towards Sikh 'infidels' *(kafirs*). The Sikh soldiers, on the other hand, are depicted in sharp contrast, as benevolent in their approach towards the enemy and practicing skilled warfare tactics. The film comes off as a cinematic attempt to negotiate with the historical reality of the Sikhs being allies of the British imperial project during the period under discussion. There are multiple invocations of the idea that rather than 21 British soldiers, 21 Sikhs fought bravely and chose death. It is essential to note that irrespective of class, caste, community, and creed, a person who defies hegemonies and in the process lays down their life is eulogized in Punjab, owing to their 'frontier consciousness'.[12]The film pleads the Sikh case by emphasising that they fought - not for money, nor for the British, nor themselves, but for the *shahids* (martyrs), their *'kaum'* (community), and the 'Guru'.

It is for this reason that the protagonist removes the headgear of the uniform and wears a *kesari* (saffron) *pagdi*—the colour of *shahidi* (martyrdom). This historically inconsistent depiction introduces "a dose of contemporary

[10] Louis E Fenech, "Contested Nationalism: Negotiated Terrains: The Way Sikhs Remember Udham Singh 'Shahid' (1899-1940)," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (October 2002): 838.

[11] Nandini Ramnath, "Kesari Movie Review: Akshay Kumar flexes his vocal cords in underwhelming ode to bravery", *Scroll*, March 21, 2019, https://scroll.in/reel/917358/kesari-movie-review-akshay-kumar-flexes-his-vocal-cords-in-underwhelming-ode-to-bravery.

[12] Ishwar Dayal Gaur, *Martyr as Bridegroom: A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi: Anthem Press, 2008), 24.

militant nationalism into the film".[13] In the last sequence of the battle, Ishar Singh strips off the insignia of the British army, reemphasising the fact that he martyred for his community rather than in service of the imperial cause. As per Ramnath, the film clearly attempts to "put a revisionist religious spin on the willingness to lay down their lives for the imperial master." One can analyse the film in light of Louis Fenech's argument that the trope of martyrdom has a certain flexibility and political utility that makes it useful for the effective mobilisation of ardour across various ideological terrains. The movie's evocative dialogues and soul-stirring music heighten the cinematic emphasis on the great sacrifice that it narrates. However, the screenplay is somewhat inconsistent, with a plodding first-half, springing to life only in the latter sequences. While the production design, costumes, and location transport the audience to the late 19th century, "the movie's religious tint and inability to see the battle as a territorial conflict between colonial subjects and colonisers place it firmly in the present."[14]

It was not very well received by cinema critics, being seen as a "dull movie about a memorable standoff". Critics largely felt that the movie did not do justice to its source material, losing perspective of the event it narrates. Having said that, it successfully fed into the contemporary milieu of hyper-nationalism, becoming a major commercial success, grossing at ₹2088 million worldwide. While the past decade has witnessed a plethora of biopics and war films—from *Sardar Udham Singh* to *Uri: The Surgical Strike*—none of them utilise the tropes of Khalsa Sikh martyrdom and colonial identity constructions in order to serve the contemporary atmosphere of rampant religious nationalism as evidently as *Kesari* does.

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[13] Ajit Duara, "Kesari Movie Review", *Open*, March 22, 2019, https://openthemagazine.com/cinema/kesari-movie-review/.

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Walking the Digital Archive: A Museum Without Walls

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Archives are commonly conceived as safe spaces for the preservation of our shared histories, as storehouses where the past is shelved, classified, and catalogued inside their walls. However, archives also appear as venues of erasure and marginalisation, where the voices of objects of memory and intimate possessions get lost due to their presence, as mundane objects within the formal structures of record-keeping and preservation. Keeping this in mind, this essay introduces to its readers the Museum of Material Memory, founded by Aanchal Malhotra and Navdha Malhotra in 2017.[1] *This virtual museum offers an alternate paradigm of archiving, one that is digital, personal, and effective. As a crowd-sourced repository of material culture, it abstains from the rigidity of institutional archives, and rather curates a mosaic of lived histories and memories through the objects of everyday life from or before the 1970s. This essay explores the Museum of Material Memory as a 'museum without walls', a concept that challenges the very boundaries and conventions of historical preservation. The aim here is to take the reader on a digital walk by foregrounding individual memory as a legitimate source of archival knowledge.*

Keywords: Digital archives, material memory, museum without walls, lived histories.

I first came across the '*Museum of Material Memory*' some years ago when I was reading *Remnants of a Separation* by Aanchal Malhotra. I was sitting idly on the terrace, gazing at my cosmos flowers with the backdrop of the sky slowly turning crimson, holding the book in one hand and slowly absorbing its words. The words "material memory" mentioned in the book kept resonating in my ears and I had the uncontrollable urge to look up the details of this unique museum on the internet. This was my first encounter with the idea of material memory, a concept that recognises objects as vessels of lived experience, carrying with them not just the physical, tangible past, but also the intangible, emotional, and sensory imprints of those who held and used them in their everyday lives.

[1] "The Museum," The Museum of Material Memory, accessed March 25, 2025, https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/the-museum/.

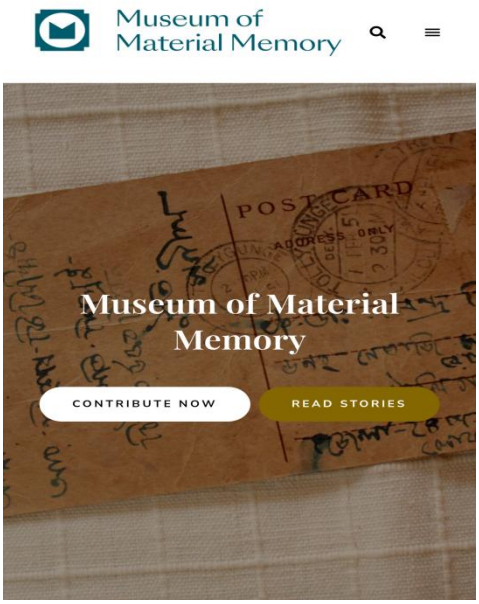

Figure 1: Online Interface of the *Museum of Material Memory*.
Source: "The Museum," *Museum of Material Memory*, accessed March 25, 2025, https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/.

Traditionally, archives and museums have operated along distinct trajectories. Archives, as Terry Cook reminds us, are anchored in the logic of evidence, provenance, and the contextual arrangement of records, while museums curate objects for their aesthetic, symbolic or historical resonance, often detaching them from their functional origins.[2] Yet, the *Museum of Material Memory* unsettles this divide. Although it presents itself as a museum, its affective emphasis on personal storytelling about ornaments, letters, utensils, and their digital preservation aligns it more closely with archival impulses, as a whisper of the forgotten words of ancestors. Unlike the formal, physical Partition Museum in Amritsar or archival projects like the Digital South Asia Library and other state-curated archives, the *Museum of Material Memory* appears as a hybrid space, a living archive of feeling, less about classification and more about communion (Figure 1). The objects displayed on its website, including heirlooms, and even a mini Quran, speak their stories not just as inert remnants of the past but as an emotional residue of history. Each object

[2] Hugh A. Taylor, "Documentary Art and the Role of Archivist (1979)", in *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds (USA: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 75-89.

is contextualised within the lived experiences of its custodian. In the *Museum of Material Memory*, the affective force of objects comes alive not only through visual representation but also through the stories that they tell. One such example is "Taarkashi: *Drawing Matrilineal Threads"* by Niyati Bhatia (Figure 2). The post recounts a delicate wooden jewellery box, which became a site of memory and craft learning after an arduous migration, thus becoming a symbol for an inherited loss.[3]

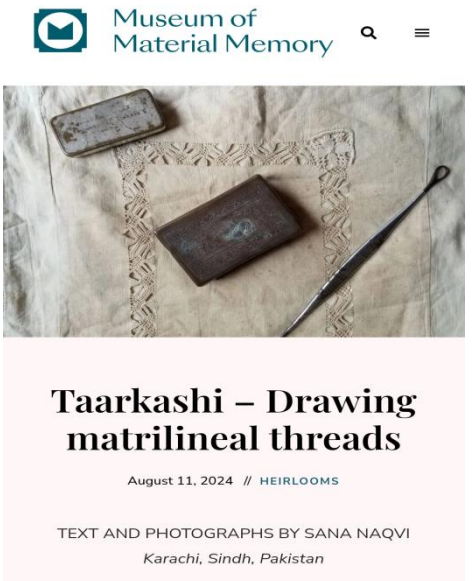

Figure 2: Taarkashi: weaving love and loss.
Source: Sana Naqvi, "Taarkashi- Drawing matrilineal threads", *Museum of Material Memory*, accessed August 11, 2024, https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/taarkashi-drawing-matrilineal-threads/.

This is not to say that within a digital archive objects do not undergo transformation; they do. In traditional museum spaces, material objects demand tactile engagement. The weight of a rusted key, the textures of aged paper, the scent of old wood—all of these need to be experienced on a physical level. However, this encounter depends upon the availability of the object in the museum. In the case of digital archives, such as the *Museum of Material*

[3] The phrase 'inheritance of loss' is taken from Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (India: Penguin Random House, 2006).

Memory, these objects are translated into images and texts; their sensory dimensions are mediated by the act of storytelling. This raises a critical question: Can a digital archive truly be a substitute for a physical one? While traditional historians may resist the immateriality of digital preservation, the *Museum of Material Memory* demonstrates that archival legitimacy does not necessitate tangibility. Instead, it proposes that memory itself can be a medium of preservation, making the digital archive a space where histories are not merely stored but continuously remain, with the fear of being remaindered.

The *Museum of Material Memory* also functions as a counter-archive, challenging dominant historiographies that often prioritise political and state-centric narratives over personal histories. Many of the contributions to the museum are centered on the Partition of 1947, an event whose official archives are largely dictated by state records, the letters of big men, statistics, etc. In contrast, the digital archive by Aanchal Malhotra reconstructs this history through the lens of the everyday, archiving the fragments of displacement and loss, along with the love that remains unrecognised in state narratives.

This approach echoes Michel Rolph Trouillot's critique of archival silence, wherein he argues that the archive is not merely a passive collection of records but an active space where history is shaped by what is included and excluded.[4] By emphasising objects as sites of memory, the *Museum of Material Memory* moves beyond state archives, offering a more democratised, affective historiography. The website of the digital archive, thus, is a strong testament to how history is not just written by conquerors or statesmen, but by families, survivors, and descendants who inherit the weight of the past as well.

This essay, which opens with the title 'A Museum Without Walls,' evokes Andre Malraux's idea of an expanded, accessible museum that transcends physical limitations.[5] The *Museum of Material Memory* is indeed a museum without walls, which embodies this idea by existing in a space that is boundless, unconstrained by geography, institutional bureaucracy, or physical decay. It also raises some thought-provoking questions about access,

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[4] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (United States: Beacon Press, 2015), 1-30.

[5] Hal Foster, "The Archive Without Museum," *The MIT Press*, no.77 (October 1996): 97 https://www.jstor.org/stable/778962.

preservation, and the ethics of digital curation. 'Who owns these histories?', 'What happens when digital archives, which claim to democratise access, still remain out of reach for those without internet or literacy?' These questions keep resurfacing in my mind.

Figure 3: Mini Quran of Jain Family.
Source: Madhavi Jain, "A Mini Quran from Partition: My Jain Family's Legacy", *Museum of Material Memory*, accessed March 30, 2025, https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/a-mini-quran-from-partition-my-jain-familys-legacy/.

Through these questions that instigate new modes of thinking, I have realised that while the digital allows greater inclusivity, it also introduces new vulnerabilities. Unlike physical archives that can survive in chambers of the basement and libraries for centuries while simultaneously providing ample food for thought, digital archives are precarious, subject to obsolescence, cyber threats, and shifting technological infrastructure. The *Museum of Material Memory*, then, not only invites historians to rethink what constitutes an archive but also to confront the transient nature of digital memory itself. At the same time, it is crucial to recognise that the digital, like the museum and the archive, is also not a neutral space. As Ravinder Kaur shows in her exploration of Partition migration[6], the very act of fleeing was stratified by class. The poor

[6] Ravinder Kaur, "The Last Journey: Exploring Social Classes in the 1947 Partition Migration," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 22 (June 3-9, 2006): 2222-2228. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418295.

who walked barefoot were not just displaced but remaindered, excluded from state records and even familial memory and material trace. The Museum, despite its crowd-sourced ethos, is still shaped by the privilege of those who could afford to hold onto objects, inherit heirlooms and possess the digital access to their stories. Thus it risks memorializing only those who had the means to remember, while those who fled without anything remain unarchived, untold.

Even if the above discussion leaves us with many questions, nothing can stop us from acknowledging the *Museum of Material Memory* as an evocative experiment in archival practice. It compels historians to reconsider the ontology of archives and the legitimacy of memory as history. By privileging the personal over the institutional, the fragment over the totalizing narrative, the *Museum of Material Memory* demonstrates that history is not merely about documents and official records. History is also about the stories that people tell, the objects they pass down, and the emotional landscapes that persist in their memory (Figure 3). In doing so, this digital archive invites us to walk through a space that is not confined by walls, shelves, or state classifications, but one that is mapped across the lived experiences of its contributors instead. This is not just an archive that can be read, but an archive that can be felt, not just through touch but also with the aid of those emotions that have been woven into the narrators' words, from the stories of *Majnu Khes* to the Sindhi *nath* (nose ring) of the Chhabria family.

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From Silence to Testimony: Narrating the Gendered Violence of 1984

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This essay reviews the book The Kaurs of 1984: The Untold, Unheard Stories of Sikh Women written by Sanam Sutirath Wazir. The work highlights the silenced experience of the Sikh women who survived the 1984 state-led violence. It presents their voices, resilience, and memories through oral testimonies, offering a gendered perspective on collective violence against Sikhs.

Keywords: 1984, gendered memory, state violence, Sikh women, survivor testimony.

History is riddled with instances of state-led violence, often manifested through the active or passive complicity of authorities, facilitating targeted persecution and suppression. The year 1984 was a watershed event in Indian history. Operation Blue Star, followed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi, led to a complete breakdown of law and order, with the state itself becoming an instrument of violence. But 1984 should not be seen as a closed chapter in history; its consequences still reverberate today, informing present-day narratives, policies, and lived realities.[1] Scholars, teachers, and human rights activists have begun to probe the event with greater depth, leading to a growing body of literature—comprising books, articles, and legal reports—that continues to shed new light on its complexities and consequences. However, the memories and narratives that have emerged from this body of literature are selective and limited in nature. The attacks on Sardars (the turbaned men), seen as primary bearers of Sikh identity, has been given more attention when compared to the gendered violence that Sikh women endured.[2] Recent interventions have tried to fill this gap by bringing in gendered notions

[1] Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, "After 1984? Violence, Politics, and Survivor Memories," *Sikh Formations* 11, no.3 (2015): 267–270, https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2015.1133104.

[2] Anshu Saluja, "Gendered Erasures in Memory: Silencing of Cases of Sexual Violence in 1984," *Sikh Formations* 20, no. 3 (2024): 149–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2024.2384843.

of violence, giving space to missing voices that have been overlooked for a long while.

The book under review authored by Sanam Sutirath Wazir, tries to fill this gap by bringing forth a collection of narratives titled *The Kaurs of 1984*, featuring women who were seemingly random victims of state-led violence.[3] The author, who is a human rights activist from Jammu and Kashmir, went door to door to talk to the survivors of the massacre. Drawing from interviews, historical research, legal reports, RTI petitions, and affidavits, he weaves together a narrative that captures the experiences of women who witnessed the brutal killings of their family members, endured deep psychological trauma, took up arms, joined militancy, and fought to survive and secure a future for their children. The book consists of twelve thematically arranged chapters, each containing a story unique to the lived experience of its subject. It gives insights into real-time spaces, with details of campsites, colonies, names of state officials, and citizen-led peace movements. The book progressively shows how women navigated through a society that was dominated by patriarchal values while simultaneously facing the chaos of a lawless state, resulting in the loss of their agency. This dual oppression left them vulnerable to the violence that was unfolding during the riots, shaping their experiences and narratives during this period.

The book begins with a detailed description of Operation Blue Star, centred around the Golden Temple in Amritsar. It paints a picture of the atmosphere within the complex when the army surrounded it and opened fire. While the role of Sikh leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale is highlighted, the book brings to light a crucial yet overlooked aspect—the experience of women and how they perceived these events. Through first-hand narratives, it brings forth the voices of those women who were present inside the complex for various reasons—some searching for their husbands, others accompanying their families to offer the first harvest of the season to community kitchens, some visiting as pilgrims, and others present alongside political outfits, refusing to abandon their loved ones.

[3] Sanam Sutirath Wazir, *The Kaurs of 1984: The Untold, Unheard Stories of Sikh Women* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2024).

The accounts evoke a sense of martyrdom, embraced by not only men but women as well, reflected in the active roles that they assumed during this period. They participated in various morchas, willingly faced arrests, and contributed to the emergence of groups like the '*Shaheedi Jathas*' (Martyrs' Contingent). Figures such as Bibi Rajinder Kaur exemplify how women, in the face of lost agency, reclaimed power by taking up arms and leading movements. Their experiences within the complex became the foundation for the ways in which they later carved out spaces for themselves, especially in a society that was engulfed in riots and turmoil. The author situates this expression by mentioning the protest song from the movement:

> *Indira sadi datri, assi Indira de soye, jeon jeon Indra Wad di, assi doon sawaye hoye*
>
> [Indira is our axe, we are the grass, as she cuts us down, we will grow in doubles] (p. 36)

The chapters that follow encapsulate the stories of survivors, presenting graphic and unfiltered accounts of the horrors women endured. Each woman's story in *The Kaurs of 1984* is unique, yet expresses the same themes of loss, survival, and injustice. For Darshan Kaur from Trilokpuri, the horrors of the 1984 carnage rekindled "memories of Partition." She speaks of the enduring struggles of women, trapped within societal constraints that demanded their silence and sacrifice. "We often make ourselves sad to make others happy," she laments,[4] only to find that, in the end, no one is truly content. Her pain is not just about the men who were killed or the homes that were looted—it is about the continued expectation to forget and move on. "Do you think that's possible?" she asks. "I will only get closure when I close my eyes."[5] For Kulbir Kaur, the search for justice became a lifelong battle. Illegally detained for 11 months, she refused to let her voice be buried. During this particular time in her life, she wrote over 60 letters directed at political figures, activists, and authorities, relentlessly demanding justice.[6] The book also chronicles shattered dreams, like that of Satwant from Nangloi. As a 13-year-

[4] Wazir, *The Kaurs of 1984*, 164.
[5] Ibid., 166.
[6] Ibid., 155.

old, she aspired to sing like Lata Mangeshkar, but the events of 1984 crushed her hopes.

The narratives also reflect a "sense of unawareness" that most of these victims experienced; accounts highlight that they only learned of the assassination of the prime minister when mobs arrived at their doors. The text also gives nuanced insights into time and space, with details about the camps that victims took refuge in, the rehabilitation process, and significant moments surrounding the gurdwaras. It covers the growing militancy in the Punjab region and elaborately captures the role played by different players in it. A sense of history emerges, keeping the experiences of the women at its core.

Wazir's approach to history is deeply rooted in oral testimonies, a method that has been instrumental in documenting experiences often erased from official records. Travelling across North India, he met survivors and listened to their narratives of loss, resilience, and survival. Shahid Amin, in his account of the Champaran Satyagraha, highlights the significance of these inquiries, arguing that their value lies not merely in being the "voice of conscience" but in the inquiry itself—an act that became a "bold experiment in truth and ahimsa."[7] This process has produced a vast archive of testimonies, preserving the voices of the oppressed and serving as a historical record of their struggles.

Similarly, Wazir's work acts as an archive for the survivors of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, ensuring that their experiences are documented rather than forgotten. These chapters, rich in survivor accounts, underscore how oral history serves as an act of reclaiming agency, offering a space for women to articulate their trauma in their own words. By weaving these narratives into the larger discourse of state violence and gendered oppression, Wazir's work highlights how oral history does more than just record the past—it challenges historical silences, resists erasure, and ensures that the voices of those marginalised by mainstream historiography are finally heard.

While *The Kaurs of 1984* makes an invaluable contribution by foregrounding the voices of Sikh women in the 1984 anti-Sikh violence, it is not without its

[7] Shahid Amin, "The Small Voice in History," in *Thumb Printed: Champaran Indigo Peasants Speak to Gandhi. vol. 1.*, ed. by Shahid Amin, Tridip Suhrud, and Megha Todi (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 2022), 13–37.

limitations. The Sikh community is not homogeneous; it is divided by caste and class, and also by religious sects.[8] Wazir's work does not take cognisance of these identities. Although the descriptions give a fair insight into the socio-economic position of women, they do not explicitly engage with these nuanced identities. While the book highlights the gendered dimension of state violence, it does not fully explore how caste intersects with gender to shape the experiences of Sikh women.

Additionally, the book operates within a specific Sikh historiographical framework, often aligning itself with the dominant narratives of Sikh victimhood and resistance, which rightfully serve as the background of the events that led to this violent episode. While this is crucial in countering state-sanctioned erasure, it creates tension with broader Punjabi historiography, which situates 1984 within a longer history of communal violence, migration, and state repression in the region. By not fully engaging with this broader framework, *The Kaurs of 1984* risks reinforcing a singular narrative that, while powerful, does not completely account for the diversity of experiences within Punjab and its diasporic communities.

Nonetheless, Sanam Sutirath Wazir's work offers insight into the voices of the victims of state-mandated violence, producing an archive that narrates the event from a 'bottom-up' perspective. His work is a welcome addition to the 1984 discourse, presenting the voices of women and strong archival material that has the potential to offer a more nuanced understanding of the event. Apart from Wazir's work, archival contributions such as Uma Chakravarty's "*1984 Living History*" and Gunisha Kaur "*Lost in History*: *1984 Reconstructed*" have expanded the discourse. The recent conviction of Congress MP Sajjan Kumar, whose role in instigating violence was also highlighted in these narratives, reaffirms the strength of archived and recorded testimonies in pursuit of justice.

[8] Harish K. Puri and Paramjit S. Judge, eds., *Social and Political Movements: Readings on Punjab* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2000).

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From Photo Kegham to Unmute Gaza: An Archive of Resistance

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"If I must die, let it bring hope, let it be a tale."[1]

These were the final words of Refaat Alareer, a Palestinian poet who died in an Israeli air strike in northern Gaza on 6 December 2023. Since then, the dominant media coverage has been saturated with Western perspectives on the matter, while Palestinian voices have had to navigate censorship, blockade, and skewed reporting. This photo essay explores photographs emerging from Gaza as tools for creating counter-narratives, and in the process, birthing an abstract archive that shifts the agency typically associated with a curated photographic repository. This photo essay focuses on the efforts of independent artists, journalists, and organizations, who are capturing the realities of this conflict—often in real time—not relying on mainstream media to curate and display a narrative coloured by political interests. This is not to claim that photographs being uploaded to the social media pages of conscientious citizens and independent journalists are devoid of politics; rather, they are imbued with a politics that lets them exercise the agency of their own narrative. The essay focuses on photographs that have shifted from documenting the violence of the war to documenting life within the war, and thereby creating an 'abstract archive' containing the "Gaza Experience." We demonstrate how this archive has the potential to serve as a tool for advocacy by making the truth visible. The essay investigates how this photographic archive is a form of resistance in a situation where people's very existence is at stake. It shows how Palestinians attempt to cling to what is left of their identity in the face of collective destruction.

Keywords: Palestine, photographs, archive, resistance, Gaza, memory.

Introduction

What people record in the form of photographs, however mundane, has the potential to become a tool of history, if need be. We highlight in the upcoming sections how photographs serve as a means of resistance despite not being an organised, large-scale tool for demonstrating discontent and demanding attention. We chose to focus on photos because they are a means of subtle

[1] Refaat Alareer, "If I Must Die," *Palestine and Us* 11, no. 2 (2024): 14.

defiance,[2] sitting at the intersection of reality and interpretation. In contrast to sculptures or paintings, photographs are not rare; they are 'infinitely reproducible,'[3] making them a suitable medium for mass communication, particularly in times of crisis. Since October 2023, journalists and civilians in Gaza have used photography to testify, turning photographs into testimonies that cannot be completely censored or erased from history. They are critical sources for understanding the "struggles from within structures,"[4] structures that are collapsing, yet difficult to act against except by quieter means that can make noise when needed.

Hence, photographs do not merely document; they 'stage' human decisions—recording what is present and what is absent, what is visible and what is hidden. Photographs become imperative for understanding one's own past, and in this case, they remind us that Gaza's history is not a passive one. Instead, it is a history which was taken by force and furnished by outside forces that took over people's homes and lands. In their desperate attempts to preserve the impression of life as Gazans, they have demonstrated an archival fever,[5] which negates the traditional understanding of the archive—being found in households of power-holding officials with a stamp of confidentiality[6]—and transforms it into one of a community repository accessible through diverse channels of information dissemination. Ariella Azoulay argues that the standard theory of the archive, influenced by the

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[2] In the context of peasant rebellions, Scott writes that subtler, or everyday forms of resistance were more rampant and even successful in creating pressure on oppressive mechanisms than outright movements. He quotes "...foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" as "ordinary weapons." James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 28-29.

[3] John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (London: Penguin UK, 2013), 28.

[4] Anindita Ghosh, *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia* (New York: Springer, 2008), 9.

[5] Jacques Derrida, *Archive fever: A Freudian Impression,* trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 14. Derrida defines archival fever as a paradoxical obsession with preserving the past while also containing the potential for destruction and forgetting, where we focus on the former rather than the latter.

[6] Nasrullah Mambrol, "Analysis of Derrida's *Archive Fever,*" *Literariness*, February 19, 2018, https://literariness.org/2018/02/19/analysis-of-derridas-archive-fever/.

Hegelian idea of 'Aufhebung'[7] (sublation or assimilation), tends to ignore the fact that archives are produced and handled by human beings. The theory claims that archives are self-standing objects that are distinct from those who produce and work with them. Referring to Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, Azoulay addresses the role of the "archon,"[8] the guardian of the archive who, together with the concepts of place and law, upholds the architecture of the archive. She criticises the way in which these actors manage access to an archive, generally holding individuals at a distance until the time when the content is made 'historical' and hence less threatening to present power structures. It is a response to an increasing urge to access archival materials in real time before they are turned into curated collections inaccessible to those for whom they were not curated. In this manner, the new repositories become 'bottom-up' archival practices, where knowledge is not being rediscovered in 'official documents' of the past, but actively formed through capturing the present.[9]

The following section presents a thematic arrangement of the visuals recorded by individuals and organisations on the ground. We focus on the period immediately following the onset of the genocide in 2023–24, selecting photographs that captured the first wave of responses, the realities of displacement, and the persistence of memory. Our thematic choices aim to counter the narrative of Gaza as an empty, war-torn space, instead highlighting it as a land layered with the memories of living, breathing people with hopes and aspirations. While many powerful images exist, our selection was limited by the scope of the paper. We prioritised visuals that either gained viral traction or reflected everyday acts of creativity—what we term as an "archive from below." These images resist censorship and dominant narrative tropes, offering a more grounded, civilian perspective of the crisis.

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[7] Ariella Azoulay, "Archive: Ariella Azoulay," *Political Concepts*, July 21, 2017, https://www.politicalconcepts.org/archive-ariella-azoulay/.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Anjali Arondekar, *For the record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 9. She notes how traditional archival research often seeks to recover "lost" histories. We seek to identify these lost and found narrative shifts in the Gaza experience, and how people are not looking for a 'lost' document but rather actively capturing the present which is their idea of resistance.

Figure 1 : Khegam Studio in Gaza.

Figure 2 : A man with his kids, posing in front of a UN plane.

A MAN AND HIS KIDS POSING IN FRONT OF A UN PLANE.

Figure 3: A Family having a picnic

A FAMILY HAVING A PICNIC.

It starts with the story of Kegham Djeghalian, whose very first photo studio in Gaza captured life as it is, and was less about any conflict. When the most recent hostilities began in 2023, there was an eruption of graphic and sorrowful visual reportage from the region, which eventually ended up being censored in various ways by the state and digital platforms. The suffering was intense, and the suffocating atmosphere demanded expressive outlets. The heavy scrutiny shifted reportage from the traditional media into the hands of local photojournalists and concerned civilian groups. Its theme shifted from a depiction of the war itself to a depiction of life that was surviving within. It is imperative to caution the viewer about the emotions these photos evoke, particularly the risk of reducing Palestinian suffering to consumable trauma.[10] Many images that emerge from conflict zones, in this age of fast and large-scale consumption, risk encountering a desensitised audience, and in this case, framing Gazans strictly as victims. However, we approach these photographs as testimonies against a "crisis of representation"[11] which confronts historical exclusions, resists erasure, and opens space for counter-hegemonic narratives. These photographs are unique precisely because they are not being produced nor consumed by systems that profit unethically through them.

Kegham Djeghalian could have hardly envisioned that his photographs, which were meant to capture daily life, friends, and family (Figure 1),[12] (Figure 2),[13] and (Figure 3),[14] would resurface as a means for people to trace their past, especially after it was engulfed in the fires of unprecedented destruction of life and property. His personal endeavour is now hailed as historical testimony to

[10] Sadaf Javdani, "The Commodification of Trauma," *New Socialist*, October 21, 2021.

[11] Karen Cross and Julia Peck, "Editorial: Special Issue on Photography, Archive and Memory," *Photographies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 130-32, https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2010.499631.

[12] Dana Al Sheikh, *Kegham Studio in Gaza,* "Unseen Photos Show Life in Gaza in the 1940s," *Vice*, April 23, 2021, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.vice.com/en/article/unseen-gaza-photos-1940s/.

[13] Dana Al Sheikh, *A man and his kids posing in front of a UN plane,* "Unseen Photos Show Life in Gaza in the 1940s," *Vice*, April 23, 2021, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.vice.com/en/article/unseen-gaza-photos-1940s/.

[14] Dana Al Sheikh, *A family having a picnic,* "Unseen Photos Show Life in Gaza in the 1940s," *Vice*, April 23, 2021, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www. vice.com/en/article/unseen-gaza-photos-1940s/.

the "lesser known"[15] aspects of life in Gaza. His bundles of images also include historic political moments, such as the visits of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Jawaharlal Nehru. This was his indulgence. He wanted to preserve his time. He worked for no one and the photos remained unmarked. At the time of their creation, these were not meant to be objects that sheltered an alternative historical record against a dominant narrative. Yet, at the time of their publication, they became pearl insights into a life less-known. A yearning to remember this lesser-known life strengthened after the violence in 2023. Both mainstream and social media were attacked by heavy censorship in the immediate aftermath of the October 2023 attacks. In her article "*It's not a glitch: How Meta systematically censors Palestinian voices*," Palestinian policy analyst Marwa Fatafta sheds light on how Meta, a multinational technology company, was systematically silencing the voices of both Palestinians and those advocating for Palestinian rights across its digital platforms.[16] So how were people navigating these silences?

The citizens and civil organisations of Gaza came through with various means of, and outlets for, visual documentation. While earlier archives were rooted in analogue formats and physical studios, the post-2023 movement is defined by decentralised, mobile, and highly digitised forms of archiving. Social media platforms have become the new battleground for visibility. Additionally, the posts on social media were reworked into website projects to create a repository while spreading awareness, imbuing these photos with an ideology and a distinct framework. One such initiative is *Unmute Gaza*,[17] a website-based art and advocacy project that aids in selecting subjectivised photographs taken by on-ground photojournalists and artists, and turning them into artworks, making them available for free, for global print-and-paste campaigns. In this manner, they attempt to avoid censorship and provide space for their viewers to pause and ponder over the art they produce which, according to their website, encourages more conversations than the photographs themselves. The project's ultimate aim is to question the Western

[15] Dana Al Sheikh, "Unseen Photos Show Life in Gaza in the 1940s" *Vice*, April 23, 2021, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www. vice.com/en/article/unseen-gaza-photos-1940s/.

[16] Marwa Fatafta, "*It's Not a Glitch: How Meta Systematically Censors Palestinian Voices*," Access Now, February 19, 2024, https://www.accessnow.org/publication/how-meta-censors-palestinian-voices/.

[17] Unmute Gaza, "Unmute Gaza," accessed March 29, 2025, https://unmutegaza.com/.

world's silence on the matter and support the photojournalists who go to great lengths to spread awareness about the suffering of the people.

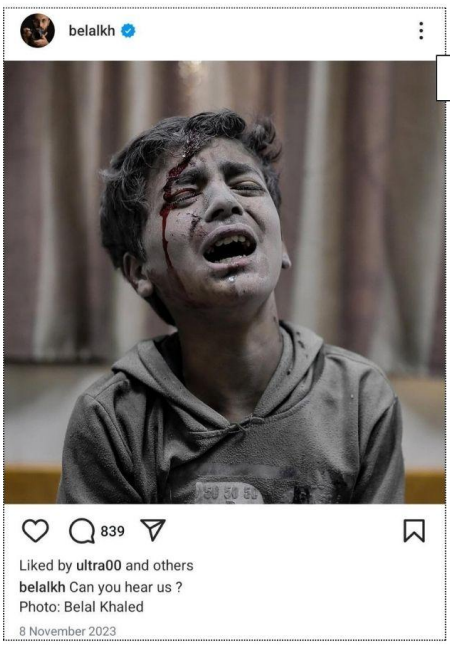

Figure 4: "Can you hear us?" Photo by Belal Khaled.

Figure 5: "CAN YOU HEAR US?" Poster by Unmute Gaza Project.

Figure 6: Unmute Gaza teamed up with Greenpeace to unfurl a gigantic banner on the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, Spain.Greenpeace / Mario Gomez.

The Journey of a Photograph

The photo (Figure 4)[18] was captured by Gazan photojournalist Belal Khaled on 8 November 2023. It depicts a distressed young child with an expression of agony, and mouth open, as if crying out. The raw image on Belal's Instagram page, which has now turned into a trove of pictures showcasing the Gazan plight, shows the child covered in dust, with his head bleeding. This picture has since travelled from Belal's page to the *Unmute Gaza* project (Figure 5),[19] to the glass exterior of the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid, Spain (Figure 6).[20] On the photo-inspired artwork under the *Unmute Gaza* Project, the phrase "**CAN YOU HEAR US?**" is written in capital letters, reinforcing the urgent plea for attention. A muted speaker symbol is placed over the child's mouth, symbolising silence or suppression. The long journey of this picture is a reflection of the efforts of both Palestinians and those advocating for Palestinians' rights in the creation of a repository that survives, endures, and spreads widely to resist the silence imposed on their voices.

The project is an example of resistance against various forms of censorship in the media on the Gaza issue and a skewed narrative that is being fostered by the power-holders. But is resistance only limited to such awareness campaigns depicting the apocalyptic nature of a genocide? Is it confined to showing the destruction inflicted and endured? Other photographs emerging from Gaza demonstrate otherwise. They attempt to document what has remained intact in both material and memory. When your existence is questioned, and is also being systematically wiped out, you respond with fiercer ways of living, which include concerted efforts to memorialise a fading memory. Every space

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[18] Belal Khaled (@belalkh), "Can you hear us?" Instagram photo, November 8, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CzZJa6Er0W-/

[19] Shepard Fairey and Belal Khaled, *Can you hear us?*, Photograph, November 8, 2023, https://unmutegaza.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/21_Shepqrd_Fairey_Belal_Khaled_November_8_2023_w.jpg.

[20] Greenpeace/Mario Gomez, *Unmute Gaza teamed up with Greenpeace to unfurl a gigantic banner on the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, Spain,* in "'Unmute Gaza' Street Art Project Uses Global Landmarks To Demand Ceasefire," *HuffPost*, January 16, 2024, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/unmute-gaza-street-art-project_n_65a66059e4b07bd6950e0e30.

When memory outlives its walls

Figure 7: Displaced Palestinians walk inside the destroyed Islamic University in Gaza city. March 25, 2025. Photo by Majdi Fathi.

Figure 8: This is not a beautiful picture of night time camping, despite the author having played with the aesthetic value of the lighting. It is a refugee camp for displaced people in central Gaza City after being told by the Israeli army to leave their homes in Northern Gaza City following the resumption of the war on the Gaza Strip. March 19, 2025. Photo by Saher Alghorra for The New York Times.

Figure 9: A Palestinian shop owner displays wedding dresses for sale on mannequins outside a damaged store in Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip. February 23, 2025. Photo by Majdi Fathi.

that has been grazed down in the violence has been brought to life through documentation; for every studio destroyed in Gaza, people have painted the walls of refugee camps with their stories, woven quilts to commemorate meaningful days, and donned cultural symbols to prevent being lost in a 'homogenised' crowd of 'victims.' The essence of resistance in the Palestinian case is not limited to capturing their destroyed homes and the dead, as done by the mainstream media, but also aims to capture the enduring human spirit.

In doing so, 'absence'[21] is repeatedly used as a thematic portrayal. Photographs are not just meant to capture the violence and destruction (which is the mainstream media's main and only focus), but also the life that 'is' lived in the midst of a warzone, and that which 'could have been' lived if things had not panned out the way they did. The photograph of the wedding gown on a mannequin against the backdrop of collapsed buildings (Figure 9),[22] is a reminder of the latter. Similarly, the photo of refugee tents stands as evidence of the absence of homes that once stood on the same piece of land (Figure 8).[23]

Memory is shown to persist in urban landscapes, in stone and mortar, and within those who inhabit these spaces. But such an absence is not just about 'emptiness.' This sense of loss lies in the consciousness about an 'active presence' that backs this imagery of 'absence.' The photographs convey a quiet, lingering sense of 'what could be.' The site emerges as a material claim to memory, captured through the lens for the purpose of memorialising. This is best described by Karen Cross and Julian Peck when they argue, "this critical history seizes upon memory and its sites, assiduously collecting the remains,

[21] Berger, *Understanding a photograph*, 28.

[22] Majdi Fathi (@majdi_fathi), "A Palestinian shop owner displays wedding dresses for sale on mannequins outside a damaged store in Jabalia, northern Gaza Strip, on February 23, 2025," Instagram, February 23, 2025, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DGaJEIxo3Rg/.

[23] Saher Alghorra (@saher_alghorra), "March 19, 2025, Gaza City, Displaced people set up tents in central Gaza City after being told by the Israeli army to leave their homes in northern Gaza City following the resumption of the war on the Gaza Strip," March 20, 2025, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DHbXt5QIwY0/.

Figure 10: The Ruins of Imam Shafi'i Mosque, destroyed during Israeli bombardment in the Zeitoun neighbourhood in Gaza City. February 28, 2025. Photo by Majdi Fathi.

Sites of Survival

Figure 11: Praying amidst the ruins of what was once a mosque highlights the sense of community and veneration of space in the memory of what it constituted. Photo by Majdi Fathi.

Figure 12: Palestinian children sit on graves in a cemetery they sought refuge in due to the conflict-ridden situation in the Shuja'iyya neighbourhood of Gaza City. February 17, 2025. Photo by Fathi.

testimonies, documents, images, speeches, and any visible and tangible signs that have signs that have been left behind."[24] The Islamic University, depicted as razed to the ground in Figure 7,[25] was once a place of 'official records,' possibly of a traditional archive. Now, it is a hollow, broken structure, having turned into a lingering image of a 'lost presence' itself.

In the context of Gaza, photographs thus become more than mere records; they enact collective memory, forging deep emotional and nostalgic social bonds. Unlike mainstream media, which often prioritises instantaneousness, strategic analysis, and statistical data regarding violence, grassroots documentarians focus on the human dimensions of the conflict. Their work captures the land through the eyes of those belonging to it, offering an archive that preserves community identities and resists the erasure of lived experiences. Community identities also frequently manifest in spaces of collective veneration, but what happens to these sacred spaces during war? Photographers attempt a 'historical reconciliation'[26] by documenting the continued use of urban (or otherwise) spaces despite the irreparable damage meted out to them, especially places of worship and veneration.

Fereshte Moosavi explores how photo archives serve as powerful tools for producing knowledge. Moosavi's analysis resonates with the work of the late Iranian documentary photographer Kaveh Golestan (1950–2003), particularly his *Prostitute* series (1975–1977).[27] Comprising sixty-one images, this series captured the everyday lives of female sex workers in the Citadel of Shahre-no, Tehran's former red-light district. Using these photographs as a foundation, curator Vali Mahlouji reconstructed an extensive archive tracing the site's historical trajectory, from its formation to its destruction, engaging in an act of historical reconciliation (the same area is now a public park).

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[24] Karen Cross and Julia Peck, "Editorial: Special Issue on Photography, Archive and Memory," *Photographies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 127–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2010.499631.

[25] Majdi Fathi (@majdi_fathi), "Displaced Palestinians walk inside the destroyed Islamic University in Gaza City, on March 25, 2025," Instagram, March 26, 2025, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DHqaqHeolfN/.

[26] Fereshte Moosavi, "Archives as Forms of Resistance," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 23, no. 1 (2024), 72, https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2024.2305526.

[27] Ibid., 71.

Figure 13.

Figure 14.

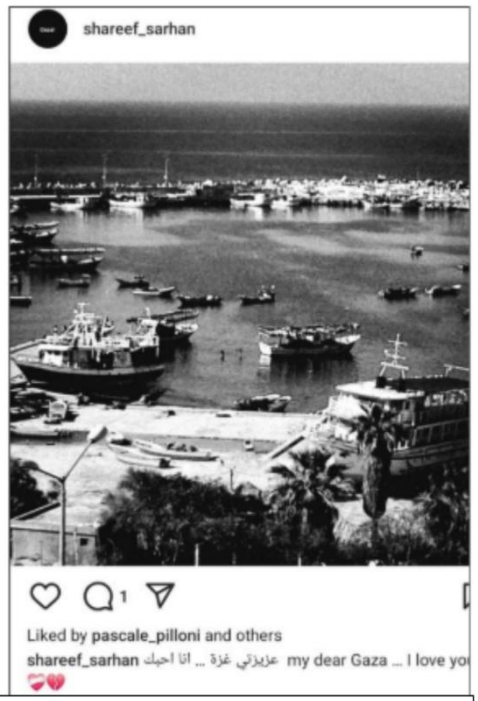

Figure 13-14: Gazan multimedia artist Shareef Sarhan posts more reminiscent photographs of life on Gaza's shores, an imagery of escape from the face of violence that Gaza has become. Along with Figure 13., these are cryptically captioned in an emotionally evocative manner "...my dear Gaza…I love you". Giving no insight into when these photos were taken. Just a fond remembrance, or even a memorial to a past which can never be retrieved.

Figure 15: Shareef Sarhan's instagram reminiscence circles back to Kegham's manner of memorialising Gaza within photographs. He says "This is the shadow of my grandfather on the sand, and this is my aunt with one arm around my father's shoulder. They're peacefully strolling down the beach barefoot as the sea brushes against their feet." This is how Kegham remembers the shores. As the background to a mundane day in his family's life.

The photographs discussed here, though not intentionally curated, end up creating an archive for the rest of the world; for both the present and the future. For example, Majdi Fathi's photographs document on-the-ground scenes of communal prayers (Figure 11)[28] unfolding amidst the ruins of the Imam Shafi'i Mosque, which was destroyed during Israeli bombardment in Gaza's Zeitoun neighborhood (Figure 10),[29] or children playing in a cemetery where their families have sought refuge after losing their homes (Figure 12).[30] These images evoke a profound sense of collective consciousness, illustrating how faith endures even in the face of devastation. The act of worship or play within these ruins becomes a powerful assertion of resilience, transforming destruction into a site of remembrance and defiance against attacks on the human spirit.

Such persistence and perseverance circle back to photographing in a similar vein to what Kegham was doing in the 1940s. Shareef Sarhan, a Palestinian artist and photographer, says: "Most people know the Gaza they see in the media—destruction, war, destruction, blockades, and occupation. Yet beyond that, there's another Gaza."[31] The photographs he regularly posts on his social media handles are less bleak in nature. Since 2023, he has often captured the beaches of Gaza where people come to relax (Figure 13),[32] the various trades that people practise on the streets, and even something as mundane as a beautiful bird perched on a tree. It is an album of Gaza—unfiltered and uncensored—showing people spending time with friends and family, doing their daily chores, documenting buildings and ports that have escaped

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[28] Majdi Fathi (@majdi_fathi), "Palestinians perform Friday noon prayer on February 28, 2025, next to the ruins of Imam Shafi'i Mosque, destroyed during Israeli bombardment in the Zeitoun neighborhood in Gaza City," Instagram, February 28, 2025, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DGnVWLbIQo7/.

[29] Fathi, "Palestinians perform Friday noon prayer."

[30] Majdi Fathi (@majdi_fathi), "Palestinian women sit on graves in a cemetery they sought refuge in due to the conflict in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood of Gaza City, February 17, 2025," Instagram, February 17, 2025, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DGLcmggIcqm/.

[31] *DW Documentary: Preserving Gaza's Photographic History. Documentary Universe*, 2024, https://documentaryuniverse.com/preserving-gazas-photographic-history-dw-documentary/

[32] Shareef Sarhan (@shareef_sarhan), "عزيزتي غزة ... انا احبك / my dear Gaza … I love you," Instagram, November 19, 2024, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DCjQ-b5t5Ta/.

destruction (for now), and giving a glimpse into the rich coastal culture of Palestine (Figure 14).[33]

The beauty of these photographs lies in their ordinariness. They are an island of calm amid the conflict and confusion that is often depicted in media emerging from that region. Infused with colours, one might easily mistake these pictures taken by him as belonging to other parts of the world, where life is not infested by armed conflict. One finds interesting overlaps in the life story of Kegham Djeghalian and his journey of capturing photos with the trajectory of logging the Palestinian genocide. Djeghalian was an Armenian who fled a genocide, landing in Gaza in the 1940s. All he wanted to do was to capture the essence of this beautiful landscape he had begun to call his home (Figure 15).[34] The cycle is repeated now, as Gaza of the 1940s appears a distant memory, and people want to desperately remember the space and its people in any and every way possible. These people, though, in contrast to Djeghalian's case, have not left Gaza behind (metaphorically). Even when outside its territory, they continue to document and amplify the plight of their people and continue to talk about it. The present is being treated as history, because the lifespan of news is increasingly short-lived.

The archives emerging out of Gaza find resonance with archiving initiatives by other marginalised groups, for example, the Rohingyas of Myanmar. Both groups have faced systematic erasures through denial of citizenship and state-sponsored genocide. The suppression has rendered them stateless and stripped them of all basic human rights. Highly marginalised and helpless, the Rohingya people have seen their plight being amplified through projects like *Rohingya Genocide Archive*[35] and digital initiatives such as *FORSEA*'s[36]

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[33] Shareef Sarhan, (@shareef_sarhan), "عزيزتي غزة ... انا احبك / my dear Gaza … I love you," Instagram, August 1, 2024, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/C-IHdzotDYn/.

[34] Dana Al Sheikh, *Kegham junior's father and aunt*, "Unseen Photos Show Life in Gaza in the 1940s," Vice, April 23, 2021, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.vice.com/en/article/unseen-gaza-photos-1940s/.

[35] *Rohingya Genocide Archive*, accessed May 26, 2025, https://rohingyagenocidearchive.org/.

[36] FORSEA, "Myanmar's Rohingya People: A Documented History, Identity and Presence," *FORSEA*, June 8, 2024, https://forsea.co/myanmars-rohingya-people/.

documentation of the identity and history of Rohingyas. These archival initiatives perform a dual role of emphasising the injustice and ethnic cleansing inflicted upon them, while also seeking to preserve the lost cultural roots of the people. The Palestinians and the Rohingyas have undergone a "cultural genocide," and their resistance has taken the form of collecting and holding onto what is left. Their archives are civilian-led, digital, and transnational, emerging from refugee camps, diaspora communities, and allied networks.

Like Palestinian "archives from below," the Rohingya archive resists the institutional silence of governments and the mainstream media. It relies on testimonial photography, personal narratives, and oral memory to assert both presence and belonging in the face of state-sponsored historical amnesia. Together, these projects reflect a broader global pattern of marginalised communities increasingly turning to self-archiving as a political act in order to bear witness, to demand accountability, and to preserve histories otherwise marked for deletion.

Conclusion

In the face of censorship and web repression, Palestinians and their allies are leveraging alternative forms of technology and creative means, to construct a living and dynamic archive that encapsulates the complete spectrum of life under blockade.

The resultant archive operates on two levels–the first is the unmediated, immediate documentation on the ground, where photojournalists and civilians photograph suffering and survival. The second is the meta-archival process of how those photographs are then curated or disseminated through projects like The *Accountability Archive*,[37] which is an initiative to scrape social media accounts of photojournalists who have succumbed to the conflict or whose content has been flagged due to algorithmic bias; or *Unmute Gaza*,[38] which abandons the traditional curatorial approach altogether. However, the

[37] Accountability Archive, "Accountability Archive," accessed March 29, 2025, https://accountabilityarchive.org/.

[38] "Unmute Gaza".

common thread that runs through both the "abstract" archives is the node of agency. The subjects of documentation are the documenters. Since the 'archons' are eliminated, the photographic content bypasses co-option and commodification because there is no 'othering.' The matter is grievable for all those involved in the making of the photograph, and not a matter of 'routine' with regard to the region, as viewed from an outsider's eye.

The *Accountability Archive* creates an evidentiary photo archive for potential judicial proceedings and historical studies. As stated on its website, "The *Accountability Archive* is a crowdsourced record of journalists, politicians, and public figures endorsing or encouraging the ethnic cleansing of Gaza and/or defaming pro-Palestinian activists. We have a vision of a public resource to be used by future historians and researchers, helping understand how power holders attempted to manufacture consent for the genocidal aggression towards the Palestinian people. We hope this resource will serve to hold them to account."[39]

It signals a shift from grassroots documentation towards what we might call meta-archival practices—intentional, curated repositories designed not only for memory but for action. These archives are built with legal, evidentiary, and historiographic functions in mind. Unlike momentary digital uploads, they seek permanence, traceability, and institutional legitimacy. By preserving metadata, timestamps, and creator information, these archives challenge the erasure of testimony and bolster the claims of state violence or war crimes. Within historical scholarship, they also complicate traditional archives by foregrounding *non-state, civilian-authored narratives* (emphasis ours), altering how future historians will write about genocide, occupation, and resistance. They ensure that Palestinian memory is not passively archived but actively weaponised against forgetting. The *Accountability Archive*, thus focusing on the role of "power holders," addresses how this particular project of curation takes the reins of the narrative into the hands of the persecuted. On the other hand, projects like *Unmute Gaza* disrupt the traditional archiving hierarchy by refusing to place the images within a specific narrative, instead releasing raw images, dependent on artists' choices of reproduction, to engage viewers without imposed conclusions. In doing so, it introduces a level of subjectivity

[39] "Accountability Archive".

into interpretation, engaging viewers on a more visceral, personal level, while also challenging existing structures that inform the 'authenticity' of a narrative. This two-step process of documenting and then contextualising resists the passive consumption of war images, fighting against media desensitisation through its inherent procedure, or the lack of it.

Through digital and grass-roots action, these new-age 'archives' challenge the limits of institutional memory and provide a decentralised, participatory model of historical records. The imperative of such work is not so much to remember Gaza as it once was, but to ensure that its people, their voices, and their lived experiences cannot be silenced, neither in the present nor in the pages of history.

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There's a Lot in a Name: Finding the Rebel Dewan in Archives

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Digital archives have tried to "democratise knowledge" by facilitating easier access to records. They have facilitated the introduction of several features like catalogue lists, indexes, timeline filters, and in-text search options. But what happens when the catalogue uses the lesser-known, Anglicised spelling of a native figure? This article tries to answer this through the simultaneous absence and presence of the figure of Velu Thampi in the archive. The key lesson is that a name alone does not suffice; rather, the various renditions of a name serve to underline both his presence and his absence. Thampi was a rebel dewan of Travancore, and issued a proclamation in Malayalam in 1809, urging the people of the state to unite against the British.

Keywords: Velu Thampi, Vallay Tomby, identity, anglicisation, archival records.

Alexandra Walsham has shown how nineteenth-century positivism and its advocates viewed archives as neutral sites where knowledge was stored. For Hilary Jenkinson, the archivist was a keeper of the truth who did not tamper with the records and preserved their sanctity.[1] Ann Stoler traces the root of the word "archive" to "archivum" (Latin), meaning "residence of Magistrate," along with the Greek term "arkhe," which means either "to command or govern." Power was at the root of this institution.[2] It was postmodern scholarship that tried to locate the formation of archives as an "ideological and sociological phenomenon." Archives represented sites of knowledge production, based on power and control, governed by leading archivists who

[1] Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1922), quoted in Alexandra Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe," *Past and Present* 230, no. 11 (November 2016): 9–10, https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtw033.

[2] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2 (March 2002): 97, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435632.

chose what was to be remembered.[3] Oliver W. Holmes noted how the initial creators of archival establishments arranged records according to their own needs and academic prerogatives. Stoler has rightly pointed out that archives must be seen "not as sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production, as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography."[4] For Michel Foucault, archives functioned as an "authorizing system that established statements as events."[5] Taking theoretical cues from such eminent scholars, Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook have shown how archives are "social constructs" that arose out of the socio-political needs of rulers, governments, business groups and individuals, and played a key role in shaping representations and identities in a society.[6] In doing so, they marginalise certain groups while privileging others in the process of preserving, ordering, and interpreting the past.

Archival records, thus, came to be seen as "spaces where memory is continually made, which also reflected how social power was negotiated, contested and confirmed."[7] Several scholars have emphasised the major role played by the state as an institution that preserves the collective memory of a society.[8] Archival spaces, therefore, played a dual role – they were favourable to the exercise of authority while also bringing attention to the contradictions prevalent in society. Richard Schein, for instance, looked at the web of power relations that connected historical reality, social psychology, and the archival domain by tracing the evolution of African-American land ownership. He demonstrated how record keeping practices varied widely across racialised landscapes, making it difficult for Black communities in America to prove

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[3] Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive," 11-18.

[4] Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 87.

[5] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 128, quoted in Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, "Critical Feminism in the Archives," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 14, https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.27.

[6] Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 2, no.1 (2002): 3-4, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435628.

[7] Joan Schwartz, "Special Section on Archives: Space and Power. "Having New eyes": Spaces of Archives, Landscapes of Power," *Archivaria* 61 (2003): 3

[8] Schwartz and Cook, "Archives, Records and Power," 1-13.

ownership rights.[9] Additionally, Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood further underlined how archival practices have yet to "adapt critical feminist agenda of dismantling the heteronormative, capitalist, racist patriarchy."[10] For third-world countries like India that were once under colonial rule, the experience of archiving was quite different, as most archival records were curated by the British.[11]

These critical perspectives around the nature of the archives have opened up conversations on democratising this institution. Derrida observed how "democratization may be measured in terms of the extent of the access of different groups and classes to the constitution and interpretation of the archive."[12] Recently, digital archives have tried to address this issue by making access to documents easier. Catalogue lists, indexes, timeline filters and in-text search options are designed in a manner to make looking for specific archival material less time-consuming. Despite such innovations, efforts required for the decolonisation of the process of creating metadata still need to be realised. But what happens when metadata uses the lesser-known anglicised spelling of a native figure? Florina Dumitrascu observed how "one can't study something that doesn't even have a name"[13] while looking at the role played by names in defining personal and social identities. This article sheds some light on how the processes of cataloguing and producing metadata remain prone to the "politics of storage."[14]

Since the discipline of history is based on "archival credibility"[15] and seeks to distinguish myths from facts, I, too, resorted to recovering the past from

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[9] Richard Schein, quoted in Schwartz, "Special Section on Archives: Space and Power," 17-19.

[10] Cifor and Wood, "Critical Feminism in the Archives," 6-8.

[11] Sailen Ghose, *Archives in India: History and Assets* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963), 22-76.

[12] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3, 4, 91, quoted in Gyanendra Pandey, *Unarchived Histories: The "Mad" and the "Trifling" in the Colonial and Postcolonial World* (London: Routledge, 2015), 3.

[13] Florina Dumitrascu, "The Role and the Function of the Name in Defining the Personal Identity and Social Identity of the Individual Convergences in Modern Research," *Revista Universitara de Sociologie* 16, no. 2 (2020): 209, www.sociologie craiova.ro.

[14] Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 93-94.

[15] Thomas Osborne, "The Ordinariness of the Archive," *History of the Human Sciences* 12, no. 2 (May 1999): 53, https://doi.org./10.1177/09526959922120243.

surviving documents. My topic –the journey of Malayalam as a vernacular in Travancore (1800-1890) – required me to locate the rebel dewan Velu Thampi, along with his proclamation in Malayalam issued in 1809, urging the people of Travancore to unite against the British. Thampi had led an uprising against the British in the wake of exaggerated subsidy demands. He attacked the Resident and the British forces while issuing a declaration that accused the colonial government of treachery. The Malayalam proclamation is available on Internet Archive, a popular digital library, with the title *"Kundara Vilambaram"*.[16] The English one is available in texts like *A History of Travancore: From The Earliest Times (1878) edited by Shungoonny Menon,*[17] and *Travancore State Manual Volume I, (1906) by V. Nagam Aiya (ed.)*[18] These texts also narrate the series of events that occurred before, during, and after the outbreak of the rebellion. Glimpses of the original Malayalam proclamation, preserved in the form of palm leaf records, are showcased on a YouTube channel that is managed by Kerala Archives. In two separate videos –one on Velu Thampi and another on the proclamation– his just reign and revolutionary policies that irked the British are discussed. His story has also been described as a symbol of 'patriotism and bravery.'[19]

Similarly, E. M. S Namboodiripad, the first communist Chief Minister of Kerala, branded the revolt as having "all the ingredients of the first stage of India's freedom movement."[20] Recently, under the *Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav*, "an initiative of the government of India to celebrate 75 years of independence and the glorious history of its people, culture and achievements," (https://amritkaal.nic.in) and the Indian Culture portal https://indianculture.gov.in) has showcased five paintings by M. R. Acharekar and these depict the events that defined the revolt. Additionally, under the

[16] Kundara Declaration by Veluthampi Dalava, uploaded by Salim Kumar Kurumpakara (August 2002), www.archive.org

[17] P. Shungoonny Menon, *A History of Travancore from the Earliest Times* (Madras: Higginbotham and CO., 1878), 339-343.

[18] V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, vol. I (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), 434-436.

[19] Kerala State Archives Department, "Velu Thampi Dalawa," December 4, 2019, video 2:03, https://youtu.be/VeR2JDPLlto?si-tKR64NufOOlakmlP.

[20] E. M. S. Namboodiripad, "The Struggle for Proletarian Hegemony: A Short Note on Freedom Struggle in Kerala," *Social Scientist* 12, no. 9 (September 1984): 33, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3516829.

section titled "Digital District Repository Detail," the event has been characterised as a "feudal resistance" against colonialism which "laid the ground for later movements that are part of the Indian freedom struggle."[21] All of this led me to believe that locating this celebrated figure was going to be easy.

The quest to find the dewan made me turn to digital archives, as they appeared to be the quickest option. Since the Tamil Nadu digital collections only held records from 1857 onwards, this option was abandoned. Additionally, the Kerala State Archives Department had not yet initiated the digitisation of records, adding to several other difficulties related to accessing them. I, then, landed at the digital repository of the National Archives of India (NAI) known as Abhilekh Patal. I assumed that I would be exposed to a number of key historical documents upon entering the name 'Velu Thampi' into Abhilekh Patal, but in vain. The Adam Matthew collection was the only option left, but the results remained the same. Sticking to a single keyword proved to be a futile exercise. The next step was to use other keywords for browsing, such as "Travancore," "Revolt of 1809," and "Kundara." The latter two keywords yielded no results, while "Travancore" provided a huge set of documents produced by latter-day dewans of the 19th century, especially Madhava Rao (who served from 1857-1872). Rao was a *Deshastha* (Marathi speaking) Brahmin who was considered to be the pioneer of modernisation in Travancore from the 1860s.[22] He was honoured with the title of *Knight Commander of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India* by Queen Victoria.[23]

However, Thampi continued to remain invisible and I returned to my secondary readings. An article on Velu Thampi by T. P. Sankarankutty Nair revealed that the *Secret Proceedings of Foreign Department of British India* for the years 1808 and 1809 held files that recorded the incidents leading to the revolt and during the revolt. Thus, files were retrieved from the NAI after entering

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[21] Indian Culture Portal. "The Revolt of Dewan Velu Thambi, 1808-1809." Accessed July 4, 2025. https://indianculture.gov.in.

[22] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004), 121-122.

[23] Madhava Rao- Grant of K.C.S.I. Title. Proceedings of the Madras Government. Political Department, File no. 193, National Archives of India (1866).

"Secret Proceedings."[24] In the Adam Matthew collection, a search on "Travancore", at first, presented a huge set of records which was then narrowed down by applying the timeline filter (1808-1811).[25] This led to the discovery of the *Military Department Records at Fort St. George, Madras* (1809), where the index list presented a surprising revelation. The name of the dewan was recorded as 'Vallay Tomby.' This anglicised way of writing the dewan's name was in stark contrast to the other expected versions of his name ('Thambi' and 'Thamby', instead of Thampi).

To verify that both were the same person, another round of search with the new spelling was carried out. Interestingly, the Adam Matthew collection returned selected pages from the Madras Despatches (1809-1813) that recorded Thampi's appointment as a dewan, the attack on the British forces, and the accusations against him. However, the NAI kept returning zero results. Upon reading the documents, it was realised that Thampi had simply been referred to as the "dewan" or the "enemy". The in-text search feature was useful when these two words were entered. A decision to look up other key figures, to test whether the same pattern would be repeated or not, was taken.

One of the documents under the proceedings of the Madras government (Political Department, 1863) in the NAI dealt with the accusation that dewan Madhava Rao had appointed his own relatives in the administrative services. Here, a table is given at the end which sums up the names of his relatives and their positions. A striking detail is that the surname "Rao" is spelt as "Row" in all of the archival records. But this difference doesn't affect the results, as both versions are accepted. The most altered name in the list was that of Lakshman Rao, who worked in the *Devaswom* section (temple administration). His name had been spelt as "Lutchmen Row," and only this version of the name produced the 1863 document. The document was discovered by entering the phrase "employment of natives," and even the NAI's title for the file contained the words "employment in state service." Interestingly,

[24] T. P. Sankarankutty Nair, "A New Look On The Travancore Revolt," *Proceedings of Indian History Congress* 39, no. 2 (1978): 633, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44139406.

[25] Adam Matthew. *East India Company Collections*. Military Department. "Our Governor in Council at Fort St. George." 1809. British Library. IOR/E/4/904.

alternative keywords have not been provided, and instead, the description is labelled as "confidential."[26]

Another figure that took time to trace was Venkata Rao, since his name was spelt as "Venkatta Row" and "Vencatta Row." But only the "Venkata Row" version is recognised by the NAI. The only person who can be located with ease was Madhava Rao. Be it "Rao" or "Row," all files pertaining to Travancore and Baroda, where he served as dewan, showed up. The Adam Matthew collection, upon entering anglicised versions, threw up a large number of despatches and correspondences related to the individual. The task of singling out a specific file finally made me realise Foucault's observation that there is a "clinical logic at work, a fine discriminating gaze that is able to isolate, on the basis of experience and example, items of significance out of a mass of detail."[27]

One might ask – are spellings that important since the option of alternative keywords is available? The entire exercise addresses this question and highlights the central issue – names are markers of the social presence of an individual,[28] and this very presence is denied in these repositories. The name Velu Thampi is composed of two identity markers, the first part is his individual name while the second indicates his caste (Nair, a Shudra caste), during the time period under discussion. The colonisers, in an attempt to comprehend the "other," anglicised it. However, for a researcher trying to regain access to the past, this presents "power at its everyday workings and machinations, wherever you may find them."[29] The alternative keywords further reveal these biases. For the Secret Proceedings "General," "Kajen," "British," "Army," "Raja" are stated. Note that the officer's name is spelt correctly, while the Travancore Rajah's name is completely absent. Again, "Tomby" is not given as a keyword. The officer's name can land one in the right place, but it leaves one wondering as to why the native subjects are not given their due recognition. Similarly, in the Adam Matthew collection, one has to initially try using a set of keywords, narrow them down and then

[26] Travancore Dewan- Relatives-employment in state service, Proceedings of Madras Government, Political Department, File No. G. O. 287, National Archives of India (1863).

[27] Osborne, "The Ordinariness of the archive," 58.

[28] Dumitrașcu, "The Role and the Function," 205.

[29] Osborne, "The Ordinariness of the archive," 59.

download the index lists of each document to see whether one is close to finding anything useful. A single index list (having anglicised names) with page numbers can be of help if the researcher has laid hands on the right document.

This experience reminded me of Ramnarayan Rawat's observation that colonial sociology worked in a manner through which the subaltern voices were suppressed.[30] The manner in which Thampi is depicted (or hidden) in these colonial records and indexes is completely different from how Madhava Rao is portrayed. It was Gyanendra Pandey who pointed out how the colonial state rested on writing a "history of reason" where the progress of man occupied the centre stage, leading to "un-archiving" of everyday life in the colony as "chaotic, trivial, unhistorical." The subaltern was placed under the realm of unreason, and it became difficult to classify them as civilised or to locate them under the purview of logical, historical time.[31] So, Thampi fell under the domain of "chaos," while Madhava Row belonged to "reason."[32] According to Rawat, archives situated in metropolises like Delhi and London were guided by this principle, while the archives at the regional and local level offered different perspectives.[33] Here, too, the pattern is evident.

The YouTube channel and palm leaf records celebrated Velu Thampi's brave resistance. None of this, however, has been highlighted by the digital repositories. Rawat, thus, highlights how there should be a distinction between colonial sociology and colonial archives, since the latter is influenced by "genres of documentation" driven by diverse motives.[34] Anglicisation succeeded in relegating the rebel figure to the background, though it did not result in the complete disappearance of the figure from the archives. Researchers are supposed to recognise the "politics of storage"[35] that went into the making of archives for a better engagement with the preserved records. The above exercise reveals how the principle is also applicable to the digital

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[30] Ramnarayan Rawat and K. Satyanarayana eds., *Dalit Studies* (London: Duke University Press, 2015), 53-59.

[31] Pandey, *Unarchived Histories*, 4-7.

[32] Ibid, 4-7

[33] Rawat and Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies*, (London: Duke University Press, 2015), 56.

[34] Ibid, 71

[35] Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 93-94.

space. In today's time, digital archives are looked upon as the tool that could "democratise knowledge"[36], since preservation and accessing records have been made easy. Yet the way power lies at its core is something that should not be overlooked.[37] The emerging discipline of Digital History thus reminds readers to "look under the hood."[38] The key lesson is that a name alone does not suffice; rather, the various renditions of a name serve to underline both Velu Thampi's presence and his absence.

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[36] Michelle Yang, "Digital Libraries and the Democratization of Knowledge," *Medium*, March 13, 2024, https://medium.com/@yangmich/digital-libraries-and-the-democratization-of-knowledge-96c7ff65d2dd

[37] Micheal A. Peters and Tina Besley, "Digital archives in the cloud: Collective memory, institutional histories and the politics of information," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 51, no. 10 (2019): 1023-1024, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1526669.

[38] Micheal J. Decker, "The Finger of God is Here! Past, present and future of digital history," *The Historian* 82, no.1 (2020):13, https://doi.org/10.1080/00182370.2020.1725720.

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Barriers to Knowledge: Challenges of Archival Accessibility in Scholarly Research

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Archives serve as custodians of history, safeguarding invaluable records that shape academic discourse, legal frameworks, and public memory. For scholars, access to these archives is essential for conducting rigorous research and constructing narratives that are grounded in primary sources. However, the very institutions tasked with preserving and facilitating knowledge often impose significant barriers that hinder scholarly enquiry. This paper critically examines the challenges scholars encounter when navigating archival institutions, with a particular focus on accessibility. Drawing from my own experience as a researcher at the National Archives, I explore the obstacles that complicate archival research and reflect on the resilience and adaptability required to overcome them.

Keywords: Accessibility, archives, requisition, scholars.

What Does It Take to Be a Scholar?

Becoming one requires dedication, intellectual curiosity, and a strong drive to explore new ideas while challenging existing knowledge. Most scholars pursue higher education, such as a master's or doctoral degree, to gain expertise in a specific field. Strong research skills, including data collection, analysis, and synthesis, are essential for producing original work. However, one significant challenge that scholars face is accessing archives, which are essential for pursuing historical knowledge. Archives serve as the repository of historical treasures by preserving essential documents, manuscripts, and records. Beyond mere storage, they meticulously organise materials to

Acknowledgement: I owe this article to the guidance and mentorship of Dr. Pallavi Chakravarty. Her scholarly insights and constant encouragement played an instrumental role in shaping the direction and depth of my research. Under her supervision, I was encouraged to engage with a variety of archival sources.

safeguard historical narratives.[1] They play a crucial role in cataloguing, preserving, and facilitating access to these records, ensuring that the stories of the past remain available for future generations.

As a Master's student, I believe that producing academic papers, articles, and books is a fundamental aspect of scholarship. Writing high-quality papers, supported by rigorous research and clear argumentation, helps refine ideas and broaden intellectual horizons. One of the most prominent institutions for researchers is the National Archives of India, the largest archival repository in South Asia. It serves as the custodian of government records of enduring value, including public records, private papers, and more, making it an invaluable resource for scholars. Established in 1891 in Calcutta as the Imperial Record Department, it serves as the Central Record Office of the Government of India. Initially, it was envisioned to include a Central Library to support various departmental libraries. Over time, it evolved into a research-oriented library, offering extensive resources to scholars, trainees, and government agencies. It houses over 1.9 lakh publications, including rare books, reports, parliamentary papers, monographs, gazettes, journals, and newspapers, covering diverse subjects such as history, politics, culture, economics, social sciences, and tribal studies.[2] However, despite their significance, national archives of India often present challenges that hinder their effectiveness as research institutions.

Reflections on my Experience as a Scholar at the National Archives

While working on my seminar paper about the history of Partition, I chose to emphasise women's citizenship, tracing its legal framework, gender biases, and the entanglement of religion. To substantiate my research, I needed access to primary sources, many of which were housed in the National Archives of India. However, my experience with searching for documents there highlights numerous challenges that hindered the research process.

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[1] M. Ashikuzzaman, "What's an Archives? : Definition, Types, Importance," *Library & Information Science Education Network*, last modified May 22, 2025, https://www.lisedunetwork.com/archives/.

[2] National Archives of India, "Library," accessed March 30, 2025, https://nationalarchives.nic.in/national-archives-of-India-library.

To access archival documents, one must be a bona fide research scholar. Prior to this, I had never worked with primary sources, and I was unaware that research took place in a separate Research Room, requiring prior registration via email. When I first visited the archives, I encountered strict security measures, and entry required an entry slip from the reception. Obtaining this pass was a cumbersome, daily procedure and had to be requested via email for each visit. Once inside, scholars must register at the Research Room and obtain a registration slip to access the library. They must also record their name, address, and time of entry in a register at the entrance of the Library Reading Room. The Research Room operates Monday to Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and remains closed on weekends and government holidays. This time restriction posed a significant challenge for me and my colleagues, as it often disrupted the flow of our research.

Another major challenge was accessing the required files. I was informed by the assigned authority that I could requisition fifteen files per day via email. If the files were available, I would be notified and required to visit the archives again to submit a handwritten requisition form. Following submission, I had to wait for a week before I could physically access the files. While filling out the pro forma (file requisition form), I encountered difficulty in identifying the branch/section of certain files. For instance, *The Index to the Proceedings of the Ministry of External Affairs* typically refers to an official archival or government-issued publication that catalogues and summarises internal discussions, decisions, correspondence, or communications made by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India.

Unlike other files, this one did not have the branch mentioned on the first page. Seeking help from the assigned authority did not resolve the issue, as even they were unable to determine the correct branch, leaving me waiting for one to two days for confirmation from the repository. Libraries and archives rely substantially on these designated individuals, who often carry out important tasks like retrieving the files for researchers. Despite this, they receive very little training and are dependent on their superiors,[3] which not only hinders the researcher's momentum but also limits their skills and growth opportunities.

[3] Dinyar Patel, "India's Troubled Archives and Libraries," *Dinyar Patel* (blog), March 27, 2012, https://dinyarpatel.com/2012/03/27/indias-troubled-archives-and-libraries/.

Furthermore, I was told that, although there is a provision for requisitioning files, it does not guarantee that I would receive all the requested documents. In fact, I was informed that out of fifteen requisitioned files, I might receive only two or three, which was a shocking revelation. This made me question how such a distinguished institution, with access to extensive resources and government support, could have such shortcomings. The Public Records Act of 1993 requires all government offices to maintain their records properly (as stated in Clause 2 of the Act).[4] Under this Act, institutions like the National Archives of India, the National Mission for Manuscripts, and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library are actively participating in protecting public records.[5] The law prohibits the unauthorised destruction of public records, with violations punishable by imprisonment, fines, or both.[6] The Act sets out procedures for the destruction or disposal of public records once they are no longer considered useful.[7]

As the National Archives of India (NAI) completes 125 years, it is important to note that many important documents are still not properly organised. These include six lakhs (600,000) documents related to the pensions of freedom fighters, ten lakhs (1 million) files on post-Partition immigrants from Pakistan, a large collection of military records, and records from the Archaeological Survey of India. These documents are crucial for further research on these historical themes.[8] Archives preserve not only historical documents but also government records, which are vital for maintaining accountability and transparency, as they allow one to scrutinise decisions made by the government.[9] The lack of proper record-keeping is a major problem in India.

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[4] Government of India, *The Public Records Act, 1993* (New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice), accessed June 30, 2025, https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/1921?locale=en.

[5] Shilpi Rajpal, "Experiencing the Indian Archives," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 16 (April 2012): 19–21.

[6] Rajpal, "Experiencing the Indian Archives," 20.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Sana Aziz, "National Archives of India: The Colonisation of Knowledge and Politics of Preservation," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 50 (December 2017): 33–39.

[9] Ashikuzzaman, "What's an Archives?".

It prevents researchers from studying modern history and reduces government accountability.[10]

Requisition for records

विद्वान का नाम/Name of Scholar:

दस्तावेज़/विषय का विवरण/Particulars of the Documents:

विभाग/Department:

शाखा/Branch:

दिनांक/वर्ष/Date/Month/Year of Document:

दस्तावेज संख्या/Ref.No.:

Signature and Date

Form 1: Showing the particulars required to be filled to access a certain file/ Requisition Form, NAI

Despite multiple visits, hours spent searching for relevant files, and numerous requisition requests, my efforts were fruitless. Over a period of two months, I requisitioned around thirty to forty-five files but received none, as they were either unavailable or undergoing digitisation. All the requisitions were rejected via email, stating: 'With reference to your request for files, it is informed that none of the fifteen requested files are available. All files are marked as N.T. or under digital scanning.' This raised another concern—why would the archives choose to digitise records during peak research months (February to May), when most universities have their dissertation submission deadlines?

Additionally, the digital archive—Abhilekh Patal (https://www.xn--abhilekhpatal-im6g.in)—proved to be unreliable due to server issues and frequent crashes, a problem faced by many scholars. This severely hampered my research, as the National Archives was the primary institution for accessing Indian citizenship and abduction records. Presented below is an indicative list of 12 files, out of the 35, I had requisitioned, in their original form.

[10] Sarth Pillai, "Archives and Archival Consciousness: A Postcolonial Predicament," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 22 (June 2012): 32–34.

Sl. No	Particulars of Documents	Ministry/Department	Branch/ Section/ Series etc	Date/ Year	Part, if any	File no	Concerned repository (To be filled by Research Room Section	Remarks from the Repository: (To be filled by the Repository) Issued, NT, Under-Search, Supplied Before, Brittle etc.
1	Issuance Duplicate Indian Citizenship Certificate to Mrs. Mumtaz Begum w/o Hasan Ibrahim Rajpurkar a Pak National	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26015/191/69 – I.C.	**	**
2	Court Case no. 84 of 1974 – Muruddin Vs. Union of India and Others (West Bengal).	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	19029/12/74 – I.C.	**	**

3	Renunciation Of Indian Citizenship under section 8 (1) of the Indian Citizenship Act 1955 – Case of Miss Kalami Fatemeh	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26020/83/75 – I.C.	**	**
4	Registration as an Indian Citizen under section 5 (1) (c) of the Citizenship Act, 1955 – Smt. Ghazala Zakira Siddiqui w/o @Satiullah Siddiqui (Pak. National)	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26015/176/76 – I.C.	**	**
5	Determination of National status under section 9 (2) of the Indian Citizenship Act 1955 – Mr. Mohammad Nasir	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26021/21/75 – I.C.	**	**
6	Registration as I.C under section 5 (1) (c) of the Citizenship	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26015/77/81 – I.C.	**	**

	Act 1955 – Smt. Basanti Bhupandra Kumar Sachade, Stateless (Gujarat).							
7	Naturalisation as an Indian Citizen under section 6 (1) of the Citizenship Act 1955 – case of (1) – Sh. Alam khan s/o Ahmed Khan and his wife Smt. Khatun Bidi d/o Abdul Rehman, Stateless Nat. (Mhr).	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26018/125/82 – I.C.	**	**
8	Hindu Girls, - An article headed 'Harrowing tale of the abducted – in a Bassah Brothel published in the 'Maratha', an English Weekly of Poona	Govt. of India: Index to the Proceedings of the External Affairs Department for the year 1947	**	1947	NO	23 (7) – AWI.	**	**

9	Annual Reports on Evacuation of non – Muslims for this year 1950–51, 1951–52, 1952–53, 1953–54.	Ministry of External Affairs	Record Management Section	1950–51, 1951–52, 1952–53, 1953–54.		31/2/54 – DHC	**	**
10	Abducted women – Medical aid. – to ___, recovered and kept in camps.	Ministry of External Affairs	(Pak. II)	1949	(PAK II)	100-49/A.P.	**	**
11	Abducted Women – Recovery. – – of — on payment of ransom.	Ministry of External Affairs	(Pak. II)	1949	NO	15-C.A.P.(A.P.)-48.	**	**
12	Abducted Women – Recovery of Abducted Persons. – Non- Muslim__ not to be taken overseas.	Ministry of External Affairs	(Pak. II)	1949	NO	8-C.A.P.(A.P.)-48.	**	**

Table 1: Showing the official requisition form from the National Archives, listing the files which were applied to access.

Navigating Challenges: Access and Affordability

The journey of research is often marked by setbacks, limitations, and moments of uncertainty. However, not giving up and choosing resilience in the face of these challenges is, in my view, the true spirit of a scholar. This determination not only reflects one's commitment to academic integrity but also signifies a deep sense of work ethic and purpose. One particularly significant site of research was the Prime Ministers' Museum and Library (formerly known as the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library). Here, I discovered a collection of papers belonging to Mridula Sarabhai, a prominent social and political activist of post-Partition India. These documents proved to be of immense value to my work, particularly in understanding the context and implementation of the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949. In order to support and substantiate the arguments presented in my thesis, it was essential to incorporate detailed case studies. For this purpose, I consulted several legal sources. Among them were the All India Reporter (AIR) Manuals, which are exhaustive compilations of legal statutes, both civil and criminal, complemented by extensive editorial commentary, case annotations, and judicial interpretations. These manuals provided a strong legal framework for my research.

To further strengthen my case analysis, I relied on SCC Online (Supreme Court Cases Online, https://www.scconline.com), a sophisticated legal research database that offers comprehensive access to a vast collection of Indian case law, including landmark judgments from the Supreme Court of India, various High Courts, and specialised tribunals. It also includes central and state-level statutes, legislative documents, and regulatory frameworks. However, access to SCC Online comes at a high cost, which often makes it inaccessible to students. Fortunately, I was able to make use of the platform with the help of a friend who is a practising advocate at the Supreme Court of India.

Additionally, I accessed another major legal resource, Manupatra (https://www.manupatrafast.com), which is a subscription-based legal research tool widely used in the legal profession and academia. I gained access to this database through my university's institutional login credentials. I must also acknowledge Indian Kanoon (https://indiankanoon.org), an open-access digital platform that serves as a popular legal search engine. It provides free

access to court judgments, laws, and legal provisions, and served as an alternative yet significant source during my research. Collectively, these resources were instrumental in bridging the gaps created by the limited access to primary government records, especially due to restrictions and delays in accessing materials from the National Archives of India. By diversifying my sources and creatively navigating access limitations, I was able to maintain the scholarly rigor required for the scope of my research.

In conclusion, I would like to add that, during my last visit to the National Archives, I was informed of a change in the system. Under the new policy, physical files would no longer be provided to scholars. Instead, the available files would be digitised and shared in the form of a pen drive, delaying the research process even more. Additionally, I was told that from that point onwards, only two requisition forms would be allowed per week. My experience at the National Archives was frustrating and unproductive due to bureaucratic delays, limited file availability, rigid procedures, and technological inefficiencies. But can inquisitive scholars, with an ever-probing mind, truly hold themselves back? Perhaps we will never know. With the consistent support and guidance provided by my supervisor, I found alternatives, such as exploring legal cases related to my topic through AIR Manuals, Manupatra, SCC Online, and other resources. At the same time, the National Archive is more than just a repository of old documents, it's a living institution that strengthens the nation's intellectual and historical foundation, making it indispensable to both scholars and society as a whole.

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Deborah Sutton. *Ruling Devotion: The Hindu Temple in the British Imperial Imagination*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2024, pp 260.

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Deborah Sutton's book, '*Ruling Devotion: The Hindu Temple in the British Imperial Imagination*' is a timely addition to the existing scholarship on Hindu temples, enriching our understanding of this religious institution. She strikes a fine balance between the title and the subtitle of her book by devoting equal attention to both the bureaucratic apparatus that governed devotion under colonial rule and the vast array of literature that shaped the colonial imaginary of the Hindu temple.

The book presents the temple in the colonial imagination as an evolving subject of artistic and philosophical inquiry, viewed through the lens of shifting colonial thought. The influence of Saidian thought is evident throughout, as the author critically examines her sources with an awareness of the Orientalist gaze. In this study, the Hindu temple is a colonial construct that, 'despite its familiarity, is deployed to embody strangeness' (p. 223). The book is ingeniously structured, both chronologically and thematically into six chapters, with a well-written introduction and a conclusion that situates its importance in the present context. The public discourse surrounding the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement and the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya has fuelled contemporary political debates. The entanglement of law, politics, and Hinduism poses significant challenges for the post-colonial Indian nation-state, but as the book suggests, these issues originated in the colonial context, where they played out in the colonial judiciary. This is aptly illustrated through the case study of the Shiv Mandir in Delhi.

The chapters are further divided thematically, showcasing Sutton's scholarly ability to navigate through diverse sources with precision. Her research draws

from the archives of the 'Document Raj' (to borrow Bhavani Raman's term),[1] church-missionary records, archaeological and art- historical materials, and the private papers of leading scholars of the study involving Hindu temples.

As one of the most visible institutions in the South Asian landscape, the Hindu temple came under colonial jurisdiction with the advent of British rule in the Madras Presidency. The victory of the John Company in the Carnatic Wars provided them with the opportunity to govern, regulate, and control Hindu shrines. The first theme in the book covers colonial jurisprudence enacted to administer Hindu temples. With the provincial legislation of 1817, the Hindu temple fell under the purview of Company law. Sutton emphasises that the 'presidency government oscillated constantly between the will to innovate, arbitrate, and reorder on the one hand and the desire to merely affirm tradition on the other' (p. 56). She traces the history of initial management attempts, the embezzlement and corruption stemming from financial transactions, and the influence of Evangelical activities, which curtailed interference in temple affairs to avoid the perception of promoting idolatry. The theme of economic transactions between state authority and religious institutions, however, predates colonialism, as Burton Stein's study of Hindu temples in medieval South India demonstrates.[2]

The first chapter concludes in the 1840s when the Company's direct intervention as patrons of temples in the Madras Presidency ended. The second theme explores the work of James Fergusson[3] (1808-1886), whose interest in temple architecture and outright critique of Indian scholar Rajendra Lal Mitra reveal his racial biases. In Sutton's analysis, Fergusson's attempt to write a global history of architecture does not conceal his prejudices, as he condemns Hindu temple architecture as an 'expression of mechanistic rote and repetition' (p. 88).

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[1] Bhawani Raman argues that colonial bureaucracy transformed governance practices into a regime of paperwork. Temple governance under colonialism relied on audits, property deeds, and court records which became a rich source for historians of Hindu temple. See, Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[2] Burton Stein, "The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple," *Journal of Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1960): 163-176.

[3] James Fergusson, *Archaeology in India with special reference to the works of Babu Rajendralal Mitra* (London: Trübner and Co., 1884).

Another theme focuses on colonial archaeology, particularly the 1904 Ancient Monuments Protection Act (a continuation of the 1863 Religious Endowment Act), which sought to "monumentalise" the Hindu temple as a site requiring colonial protection. The author examines the impact of this act through case studies of temples in the Bengal Presidency (Orissa). By incorporating regions like Madras, Bengal, and Delhi, Sutton not only highlights regional nuances but also weaves a pan-Indian history of Hindu temples under colonial rule. Though by overlooking temples in Punjab and the North East, where anti-colonial resistance took different from the regional imbalances in the book becomes more evident.

The book adeptly illustrates challenges to colonial legislation, where the "temple public"[4] resisted, negotiated, and thwarted colonial attempts to sanitise urban spaces around Hindu temples. Drawing from the case study of the Shiva temple in Delhi, Sutton shows how, during the nationalist movement, the Hindu public manoeuvred to reclaim public spaces as sites of divine presence, thereby challenging colonial authority.

Sutton enriches her work by incorporating literary fiction, poetry, magazines, and pamphlets published in nineteenth-century Britain as historical sources. Victorian literature's fascination with "things Oriental" is critically analysed through the works of writers like Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster. While temples appear sporadically in their writings, the imagery they created shaped English readers' perceptions of Hindu temples.[5] Sutton poignantly captures the shift in their portrayals, noting Forster's greater sensitivity compared to Kipling's. Through these writers, she explores 'the life of the Hindu temple as a space of erotic and sensual danger' (p. 160). The Hindu temple of the colonial imagination is best described as a 'literary creature' through which colonial entitlements were examined.

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[4] Deepa Reddy and John Zavos, "Temple Publics: Religious Institutions and the Construction of Contemporary Hindu communities," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 13, no. 3 (December 2009): 241-260.

[5] In her classic study of English Literature, Gauri Vishwanathan shows how literature shaped colonial governance. The representation of Hindu temples in colonial literature helped reinforce the secular versus sacred binaries in colonial policy. See Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary study and British rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

The final theme pays tribute to Czech-born Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993) and her lifelong fascination with Indian art, exemplified in her two-volume classic '*The Hindu Temple*' (1946).[6] Sutton examines Kramrisch's contribution to Hindu temple studies, emphasising her view that temple architecture cannot be separated from devotion; devotion is intrinsic to its aesthetics. Sutton builds on the work of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1981), who demonstrated colonial law's intervention in the religious sphere despite claims of neutrality,[7] and historian Ishita Banerjee Dube (2001), who elaborated on this in her study of the Jagannath cult in Orissa.[8]

While Sutton focuses on the "colonial imaginary" of the temple, she also deftly captures the agency of the colonised, whose 'authority the colonial state could neither reconcile nor control' (p. 224). As the author illustrates, colonial discourse reconfigured the very idea of the Hindu temple, framing it as a dynamic and contested concept. Yet the use of the definite article 'the' risks essentialising this shifting notion, inadvertently reinforcing a singular, static conception rather than reflecting its historical and ideological evolution. '*Ruling Devotion*' overlooks the active role of caste and gender dynamics in shaping colonial legislation regarding Hindu temples.

Even in the case of the Swayambhu Shiva temple, subversion is presented as a monolithic Hindu public act. Nowhere is this clearer than in the omission of *devadasis*—ritual specialists whose livelihoods were criminalised through alliances between colonial moralists and elite reformers. This gap obscures how colonial 'governance' weaponised gender to reconstitute Hindu traditions, a process critical to understanding the very 'imperial imagination' Sutton interrogates.[9] The absence of Dalit temple entry movements—a significant struggle against caste oppression in the 1930s—is another notable gap. These movements challenged restrictions on temple entry in public

[6] Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* vol. 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1976; orig. pub. 1946).

[7] Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial rule: A South Indian Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[8] Ishita Banerjee-Dube, *Divine Affairs: Religion, Pilgrimage, and the State in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001).

[9] Devesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

forums and colonial courts, marking the temple as a site of resistance not only against colonialism but also against systemic Hindu social hierarchies. This omission remains a major lacuna in an otherwise comprehensive work. Despite this, '*Ruling Devotion*' engages with diverse themes and offers valuable insights into the imperial imagination of the Hindu temple. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the study of Hindu temples.

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Priya Atwal. *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp 288.

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The cover page of Priya Atwal's book is a monochromatic painting on a cobalt blue background depicting Rani Jindan, the youngest and last queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Along with the queen is her five-year-old son, Duleep Singh, who became the youngest and the last maharaja of the shrinking Sikh Empire of Punjab in the nineteenth century. This painting highlights the rich confluence of culture, pivotal to Ranjit Singh's empire. The formidable white portrayal of *Mai* Jindan and Duleep, superimposed on the background of the Lahore fort, conveys the saga of sustenance, struggle, and suffering of the nineteenth-century Sikh empire. Perhaps the author chose this painting to 'rescue' the marginalised characters overshadowed by the tall image of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, very fondly known as *Sher-e-Punjab*. This book, originally a thesis by Priya Atwal, consists of five chapters and engages with socio-cultural events that impacted the high politics of Punjab in the nineteenth century.

The story is about the making of the Sikh empire from the perspective of 'lesser-known' personalities. Atwal writes, "If he was the lion of Punjab, then Jind Kaur was the heroic rebel queen who courageously fought to protect her husband's and son's empire, and ultimately, the freedom of the Sikhs and Punjab as a whole" (p. 6). The author states that British sources have deliberately celebrated Ranjit Singh's over-magnified portrayal, which has gone unquestioned in academic and public circles. This hyperbolised narration of the maharaja has come at the cost of discrediting the political acumen of his heirs and their right to rule after his demise (p. 8). Further, little attention has been given to the role of queens and princes whose support was quintessential for the maharaja's rise to power. Thus, this book examines the role and contribution of women in empire-building, including influential

warrior women such as Sada Kaur (mother-in-law of Ranjit Singh), Raj Kaur (Ranjit's mother), *Mai* Nakain (the second wife of Ranjit Singh), and Rani Jindan (the last wife of Ranjit Singh). Interestingly, not all women came from elite sardar families. Rani Jindan was the daughter of a kennel keeper. Similarly, Begum Gul didn't belong to elite circles either. This book suggests that the strength of Ranjit Singh lay in bringing people from different spheres under his aegis with minimum bloodshed. This presents a culturally holistic picture of the empire. However, after the death of Ranjit Singh, this 'strength' resulted in a family feud over claims to the throne and, ultimately, deflated the empire. While the author has focused on the various symbolisms in the imperial court of Ranjit Singh, the zenana as an institution has been neglected. The internal politics of the queens inside the harem would be worth exploring. Surprisingly, we do not find any mention of the daughters of the empire even though Ranjit Singh and his sons married multiple times. Information on the matrimonial alliances of the daughters becomes hard to locate. With matrimonial alliances comes the question of kinship—*biradari*—which became a fluid medium for social mobility. The author cautions readers to avoid limited comparison of Ranjit Singh's empire to that of the imperial Mughals. Nevertheless, readers might make out an uncanny similarity with Akbar on the aspects of matrimonial alliances and uniformity in the court where the emperor was at the apex. Similarly, the reign of Rani Jindan at the Lahore Court seems congruent in terms of ruling style to that of the junta of Nur Jahan at the Mughal court.

One of the essential elements in the making of an empire is to document events. The author has carefully and critically engaged with available source materials. From the Lahore court, it was Sohan Lal Suri's work, titled *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*, which captured the story of the maharaja in five volumes. It is reminiscent of a diary-like history of the kingdom of Ranjit Singh's family which began with his great-grandfather, extending to the reign of his youngest son Duleep Singh, and documented the Company's annexation of the Sikh empire. Suri's writing must be taken with a pinch of salt as a court historian. It is no surprise that at Kharak Singh's wedding ceremony, the presence and comments of British official Henry Fane find more mention than the bride Nanki (p. 119). Atwal has also incorporated the writings of poets like Muhammad Shah who wrote *Jangnama*. This poem describes the 'bloody war of succession' after Maharaja Kharak Singh's death. Surprisingly, the British

writings are not uniform in their narrative. Major George Broadfoot (Company's political agent to the North-West Frontier) was the first to claim that Maharani Jindan was having an affair with the then-wazir Lal Singh. In contrast, Joseph Davey Cunningham, former political assistant at Ludhiana, strongly disagreed with the Political Agent's abrasive style of handling relations at Lahore and publicly challenged the negative characterisations of Jindan Kaur (p. 183). Alexander Burnes, the man behind the fabrication of Kharak Singh as a weak ruler, referred to him as an 'imbecile'. There is little evidence to suggest that they ever met in person. These deliberate attempts to villainise Jindan Kaur were part of the plan to annex the empire completely and dismantle the Khalsa Army. This wide set of sources makes Priya Atwal's work worth reading. The book provides readers with a holistic view of how the making of the Sikh empire unfolded in the nineteenth century. At the same time, it refrains from using anachronistic labels and humanises historical characters in both historical context and fact.

The first chapter, 'To be a Sikh King', contextualises the hardships of the eighteenth century for the Sikh *panth*. The last Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh, died of wounds inflicted by the assassins under the orders of the Mughal governor of Punjab. In this period of chaos, the author examines the notion of governance, the ideals of sovereignty, and the complexity of the Mughal-Sikh relationship, within which the tradition of martyrdom is vital and where both the Mughals and Sikhs supported each other's growth and sustenance. She notes that Ranjit Singh's empire had a strong cultural foundation, with an 'open marriage policy' and strategic public image building, thereby uniting various military factions (misls) into a cohesive Sikh empire. This vast empire extended from the Khyber Pass in the north to the Sutlej River in the south. The author knits this tumultuous time frame with the teachings of the ten Gurus, quintessential for readers to comprehend the context, inclusive of Guru Nanak's commentary on Babur's invasion and the plight inflicted on women. Nanak questions the violent 'imposition of monarchy' on the subjects. However, the Sikh and Mughal spheres of influence complemented each other under the aegis of Akbar. Discord developed with the execution of the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev, by the Mughal emperor Jahangir in May 1606, and this became a critical watershed moment for the existing Mughal-Sikh relationship. The author has attributed this drastic attempt by Jahangir, an outcome of his discontentment, to the upsurge of the growing popularity of

the Guru. The Mughal ruler had witnessed mass conversions of Muslims, Jatt migrants, and Hindu Kings of Punjab who controlled regions of the Hill states for generations because ideals of egalitarianism and anti-casteism had appealed to many communities. This popular appeal emerged as an administrative hindrance to local governance. Further, this constituted a challenge to the contemporary political elite, as the gurus emerged as 'sacred kings' and the 'Caliphs of the Age' in their own right (p. 22). The final *coup de grâce* was to provide shelter and support to the rebellious prince, Khusrau (son of Jahangir).

Despite several hardships, the gurus preached the idea of *Halimi Raj* (the rule of humility). The author has carefully included the commentary of the gurus on political control and governance. Interestingly, while the gurus criticised the emperors and ruling elites, they did not advocate abolishing the institution of monarchy. She writes that the spiritual gurus were perceived as sovereign figures in their own right, further challenging the Mughals and the landed elites. Additionally, three gurus—Guru Arjan (1563-1606), Guru Hargobind (1595-1644), and Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)—were pivotal in spreading the ideas of Sikh kingship, paving the way for Ranjit Singh's empire. Here, Ranjit Singh must be placed in the nineteenth century, when the Mughal empire was shrinking and Marathas were attempting to unify their territory.

Atwal writes that notable historians, like Khushwant and Patwant Singh, have emphasised, 'Sikhism and monarchy are a poor fit' (p. 29). They suggest that with the creation of the Khalsa sect, traditional royalty was uprooted and an attempt was made to make it more democratic and republican. Contrary to this, Ranjit Singh established a hereditary monarchy, a clear departure from the 'republican' model of 'joint sovereignty'. Patwant Singh has attributed the misguided imposition of a system of hereditary monarchy on the Sikhs as a cause of the failure of the Sikh Empire (p. 30). The author has rejected these binaries of 'monarchical rule' versus 'republicanism', citing the complex and evolving nature of Sikh political thought. However, after the tenth guru, a political vacuum seems to have prevailed. With Afghan incursions and massacres, the *panth* found itself in immense trouble, leading to the formation of a republican and democratic Sikh body called '*Gurmata*'. These fissures were visible, with the sardars working for their autonomous share and acting as rajas, deviating from the promised ideals of the last guru. Thus, various

factions called misls began to emerge. In the second chapter, 'New Dynasty, New Empire', Atwal explores the traits and tactics of Sukerchakia Misl credited for unifying other misls and ruling massive territories by the time Ranjit Singh took over. Certainly, what worked in the favour of Ranjit Singh was that he was not the founder but an heir apparent to the Sukerchakia Misl, one of the most powerful war bands that had a major role in the creation of a new empire (p. 44). The author calls it a shift from 'misl-age' to a form of 'dynastic colonialism'. She presents the empire as an entity in which power was extracted from lands inherited through multiple matrimonial alliances while also increasing its cultural soft power.

The book delves into the geopolitics of the region in the third chapter titled 'All the World's Stage'. Increasing Russian strongholds in Afghanistan caused anxiety to the British officials. Consequently, a formal agreement—the Friendship Treaty of 1809—between the Company and Lahore was signed for demarcating River Sutlej as the southern boundary of the Sikh empire. According to this Ranjit Singh could not extend his empire to the Phulkian state but he could expand into central Asian and Afghan regions. This certainly benefited the British more as it restored peace in the north and provided protection from Afghan incursions. Ranjit Singh agreed on terms that recognised him as the Company's primary ally in the Punjab. Before this, his uncle Bhag Singh, who was the raja of Jind, was coordinating the Lahore-Delhi relationship. With this recognition, Ranjit Singh received an equal footing with the British (p. 96). Further, he hierarchised the imperial court of Lahore. Sher Singh, the son of Ranjit Singh, was deputed to entertain political agents like Wade, Kharak Singh (the heir apparent), Nau Nihal Singh (grandson of Ranjit Singh) while other princes in the direct line of succession were given the responsibility of attending the Governor-General (p. 101).

The 1830s marked the pinnacle of Lahore and Company relations, especially with two successive British Governor-Generals, Lord Bentick and Lord Auckland, at the helm of discussions. The courtly practices of giving Khilat, exchanging turbans and incorporating royal insignia such as kettle drums, elephants or parasols, and granting gifts to the British officials were also essential 'political weapons' with which Ranjit Singh experimented (p. 91). Informal and formal parties, along with other forms of gatherings, were another medium through which friendship and stringent diplomatic relations

were cemented. The chroniclers of this period suggest a thick bond between Singh and the Company; thus, one wonders if there were any matrimonial alliances between Sikhs and the British. The author documents each occasion for Ranjit Singh as being meticulously transformed into political benefits. For instance, the marriage of Kharak Singh to Chand Kaur in 1811 and the union of his son Nau Nihal Singh and Sahib Kaur in 1837, were matters of great pride for the *Sher-e-Punjab*. He showcased this exorbitant wedding ceremony as the highest exhibit of his power which was to continue even after his demise. He had an heir and a whole line of successors with the Khalsa Army to guard them. The author points out the dramatic increase in the level of royal symbolism used, projecting the establishment of a new social hierarchy in the Punjab (p. 113).

However, tables turned with the death of Ranjit Singh in 1837, after which Kharak Singh took over the throne. The historians of this period have declared that the prime reason for the decline of the empire was the presence of weak successors. Chapter four, 'After the Lion: Writing the Story of Ranjit Singh's Heirs', challenges this by emphasising on a story of sustenance rather than decline. Scholars are divided on who would have been an efficient ruler to carry forward the legacy of Ranjit Singh—Kharak Singh or his son Nau Nihal Singh. Atwal remarks that Kharak Singh as the 'weak maharaja' was a narrative constructed and circulated by the British commentators (p. 128). Kharak Singh reigned for a very brief period, from 27 June 1839 till 5 November 1840. An unexpected turn of events resulted in the untimely death of Nau Nihal Singh within five days. At this juncture, Rani Chand Kaur declared her regency with the assumption that the widow of Nihal Singh would give birth to the future maharaja of Lahore. This certainly angered Sher Singh, who was second in the line of succession, and he also had a twin brother Tara Singh. Then takes place a bloody war of succession with multiple stakeholders - junior royals, the aristocratic nobles of the durbar, Khalsa Army and the British officials. Ultimately, it was five-year-old Maharaja Duleep Singh who sat on the Lahore throne with his mother Rani Jindan as his regent. The subsequent wazirs - Dhyan Singh, Gulab Singh, Lal Singh, along with the British, a former ally, betrayed the promise of friendship with Ranjit Singh. At this juncture, the alternate title of the book could be 'Loyal and Rebels'. Ultimately, this story is about who benefited the most from the deaths of the

royals and sought to seize power by placing themselves at the centre of power - the Lahore throne.

In chapter five, 'The Boy King - the Rebel Queen and the British Empire', Atwal writes that Rani Jindan had become the site of scrutiny from the time she initiated her regency for her five-year-old son, the new Maharaja Duleep Singh. The first Anglo-Sikh war, in which the Khalsa army fought the British, resulted in the slashing of two-thirds of the Ranjit Singh empire, massive war indemnity, and Kashmir ceding with the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh. There was an oriental outlook regarding the women of the east being 'unfit for rule'. The British portrayed the Rani as the 'Messalina of the East'. She was held responsible for the second Anglo-Sikh war during which she took vengeance for the ruthless death of her brother Jawahar Singh from the Khalsa Army. Consequently, she was labelled as a bad influence on the maharaja and hence separated and later imprisoned in Chunar Fort. Such fabrications show that Jindan Kaur fought till the very end for her son's rights. Even when she was in exile, she was able to ignite the Multan rebellion against the British which was later suppressed. However, morally, she triumphed when 'English, Christian turned Duleep Singh' chose to revere the tenets of Sikhism. But till her very last breath, feisty Rani Jindan left no stone unturned in preparing her son to pick a fight against the crown. Although Rani Jindan died in 1861, her continuous efforts had a lasting impression on Duleep. So much so that in the 1880s he reconnected with his family at Lahore and the Sandhanwalia cousins (who had supported him to take the throne at the age of five and attempted to avenge Chand Kaur's murder), along with Thakur Singh, acted as the 'provisional government-in-exile' and became his allies. However, all these were futile efforts as it became clear to Duleep that Dalhousie and his colleagues had made no plans to support his heirs. Duleep had six children (with his first wife, Bamba Muller) and two with his mistress, whom he later married after Bamba's death. It is important to note that his eldest son was named Victor after his godmother, Queen Victoria. The last maharaja of Punjab, Duleep Singh, died a broken-spirited man in Paris in 1893 (p. 213).

Throughout the book, Atwal has managed to keep the reader engaged while raising diverse questions. Her curious observations and inquiries keep the readers wanting more, for example: what happened to the other queens when the company took over the Sikh empire? She writes, "Gul Begum became the

senior-most queen in the pension rankings when Queen Jind Kaur was in exile… it was the dancing girl and the kennel keeper's daughter who had the last laugh" (p. 212).

> '*Ik si rajah, ik si rani,*
> *Dono margeh, khatam kahaani!*'
>
> ['Once there was a King and a Queen,
> they both died, end of story!'] (p. 207)

The author has used this folk couplet to narrate the story of the Sikh Empire and its lasting impression on popular memory. However, to tweak the couplet to fit the present narrative, there was one maharaja, many ranis and multiple royal stakeholders. This book is a reminder that history writing must question contemporary concerns and biases pertaining to hagiographies, misogyny, and orientalism, concepts that are packed with stereotypes, oversimplifications, and have coloured perceptions over time. This makes Atwal's book an essential read for anyone interested in exploring the Sikh empire of nineteenth-century Punjab.

Ishtiaq Ahmed. *Jinnah: His Successes, Failures and Role in History*. Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2020, pp 808.

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Ishtiaq Ahmed draws on public speeches, letters, and accounts written by biographers such as Stanley Wolpert and Hector Bolitho for his book on the '*Quaid-e-Azam*' of Pakistan, titled 'Jinnah: His Successes, Failures and Role in History'. Many consider Mohammad Ali Jinnah to be an exceptionally puzzling and enigmatic figure in the history of British India and post-Partition Pakistan. Ahmed introduces us to his personality with the aid of Wolpert's description: "Few individuals significantly alter the course of history. Fewer still modify the map of the world. Hardly anyone can be credited with creating a nation-state. Mohammad Ali Jinnah did all three."

The first half of Ishtiaq Ahmed's book looks at the formative years of Jinnah as a politician involved in the wider socio-political landscape of 20th-century India that was striving to establish an independent state edifice for itself, in opposition to the repressive colonial state. The author categorises Jinnah's political trajectory into four stages: as a nationalist who was a part of the Indian National Congress, a communitarian, a Muslim nationalist, and finally, as the founder of a new nation-state—Pakistan. By undertaking such an exercise, Ahmed attempts to show us how an individual, who also happened to have historically unique and sociologically distinct prerogatives, transformed over a period of approximately three decades. He utilises theories proposed by leading thinkers of their age such as Thomas Carlyle, Georgi Plekhanov, and even Karl Marx, to delineate the shifting roles played by influential individuals across the course of history. Since Ishtiaq Ahmed is first and foremost a political scientist, his voluminous book—going beyond 700 pages—is one that records the political exigencies of the 20th century. It does appear as a work of political history that goes deep into the nuances of negotiations between the major political actors of this period that included several prominent figures from the Congress, Muslim League (from the 1930s

onwards), and the British colonial state. It brings forward the complex nature of events that stand out and were/are associated with several controversies. The Lucknow Pact, the 1937 Elections, and the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 have drawn the attention of several students and scholars, and these events have been given special attention in the book as well. Above all, this opus is carefully laid out in a linear fashion and does not abandon history's major preoccupation—contextual sensitivity.

Jinnah's disillusionment with party politics, the responsibility for which seems to have been placed on the Congress' doorstep, prompted him to give up his nationalist allegiances and tendencies. Further, this was accompanied by a rather unhappy exit from the Indian National Congress. The Lucknow Pact of 1916, that had been formulated while keeping Hindu-Muslim unity in mind, fell through as well. The Congress-League understanding started to lose stability. The 'ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity', a noble-sounding title bestowed upon Jinnah by Sarojini Naidu, now began to traverse the paths that eventually led him towards communitarianism. This move was also reinforced by political clashes between him and Gandhi, especially during the Khilafat Movement. Employment of overtly Hindu symbols and the politics of mass mobilisation did not appeal to the diligently constitutional Jinnah, and the ideological chasm between him and Gandhi only seemed to widen over time. In fact, at this juncture, the former appears to be giving in to the theory of a Congress government being equivalent to Hindu Raj, a rumour that he had himself denounced as a 'bogey' in one of his speeches, which was also a call for self-government in British India. Concessions given by the colonial state on the basis of communal identities had a strong and divisive role to play in the career of Jinnah as well. The Two-Nation Theory devised by him, chronologically following the release of his 14 Points and the Nehru Report, can be viewed as an outcome of this divide-and-rule policy. However, the period between 1930 and 1934 witnessed a detached and distraught Jinnah in 'exile' in London with his sister and daughter, following his wife Ruttie's demise. He gave up politics and returned to practising law again. This estrangement from politics did not last for long; his comrades, including Mohammed Iqbal and 'Nawabzada' Liaquat Ali Khan, urged him to return. There are significant gaps in the literature dealing with this phase of Jinnah's life, and it has not been explored adequately by historians.

The elections of 1937 were a major turning point in Jinnah's life. Not only did they mark his return to a life of proactive politics, they also showed how scattered voting preferences of the Muslim populace were. Regional parties of Punjab and Bengal enjoyed a better position among Muslim voters, and the Muslim League's dismal performance attests to this fact. The Congress, too, secured an overwhelming majority. Jinnah recognised factionalism and a lack of proper organisation behind his party's defeat and was willing to cooperate with other political units in the face of a major loss. Before the elections, it had been decided that a coalition government would be formed in the province of U.P., notwithstanding the election results. However, Congress reneged on its commitment. Resentment and anger made Muslim League members accuse the Congress of bad faith and having a dictatorial leadership. According to Ishtiaq Ahmed, this was "the blunder which elicited a communalist reaction in Jinnah" (p. 126).

The 1940s seemed to be a propitious time for the League. The Pakistan demand was firmly articulated in the Lahore Resolution of March 1940. ".... after delivering the 22 March 1940 presidential address in Lahore, Jinnah was never once willing to agree to a power-sharing deal with the Congress in a united India" (p. 329). However, Jinnah accepted the 16 May Cabinet Mission Plan (1946), which explicitly rejected the demand for Pakistan and recommended power-sharing between federal units. This political manoeuvre of his is quite intriguing, considering Congress' refusal of the same. However, he still did not compromise on the Pakistan demand made by the Muslims of India. Stafford Cripps, who led the Mission, reported the same regarding Jinnah's stance. The reason behind this surprising change lay in the tussles over constitutional issues. Congress leadership always wished for a strong centre, whereas the Muslim League demanded residuary powers for federating units, which would constitute a nation with a relatively weaker centre. The trouble of power-sharing between these two parties came in the way of fruitful negotiations. Jinnah's political demeanour was also shaped by his denial of playing 'second fiddle' to the Congress. The British rejection of Partition is surprising, as it marked a U-turn on their initial divide-and-rule policies that had a long legacy in the forms of the Bengal Partition of 1905, acceptance of separate electorates, and the Communal Award of 1932, among others. Britain wanted a united India that would be an ally of the Commonwealth during times of duress and tension. "In short, the Cabinet Mission failed to find a

constitutional formula which would satisfy the major protagonists while securing the overall British geostrategic and economic interests in the subcontinent" (p. 367). These historical events make Ishtiaq Ahmed's observations more conclusive, especially with reference to Jinnah being a politically astute and aware individual who staunchly believed that India's future could only be decided by the British government. The title of the 14th chapter—'British Decision To Partition India'—highlights that the events of 1947 were driven by the colonial state, and the Muslim League or Congress alone was not responsible for the same.

The second half of the book delves into the role played by Jinnah after the Partition. Pakistan, whose structure had always been surrounded by riddles, came into being with him taking over the mantle as a stubborn yet strict Governor-General. To assert that the final years of his career preceding his death were surprising would be incorrect, since it has been argued that the contours of Pakistan were left undecided and uncertain till the very last moment. Therefore, it was very convenient for Jinnah to subvert several political precedents. He started campaigning for a united Pakistan with a strong centre and a homogenous cultural identity which would not have federal units with guaranteed autonomy. He exercised absolute power and tried to endorse the new nascent nation-state to 'Western' powers as a fortress against Soviet communism. This portion of the book also looks into the events that followed Jinnah's death and examines the contemporary political issues that plagued the nation from the 1970s onwards, up to the first two decades of the 21st century. The successors of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, including Liaquat Ali Khan, Ayub Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and Zia-ul-Haque, changed the face of Pakistan. They charted a different course and diverged from the originally ambiguous ideals of their '*Baba-e-Qaum*'. The democratic interregnum of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif was also short-lived. Electoral rigging emerges as a pressing and concerning issue. Following the take-over of Pervez Musharraf, relations with India also shifted dramatically. Ishtiaq Ahmed brings our focus back to the present with references to the Prime Ministership of Imran Khan in recent times.

To conclude, it would be apt to state that Ishtiaq Ahmed's book leaves its readers with a lot of questions. It is interesting to see that Partition was mostly about political disputes, and the phenomenon of 'communalism' was used to

mask them. Religion was used as a tool to mobilize the people and because of its sensitivity—along with being a topic close to people's hearts—it worked. However, the major problem is related to the political foundation of Pakistan: Did Jinnah set the stage for his successors to take undue advantage of the loopholes that were inherent in the structure of the state? Did he make it easier for them to assume positions that were authoritarian and dictatorial in nature? To find answers, it is pertinent for us to dig deeper into the political economy of the Pakistani state, the study for which has been flagged off by the Marxist anthropologist Hamza Alavi.[1] The 'bureaucratic-military oligarchy' framework is helpful in understanding the class structure of the nation. However, one needs to go beyond this particular model, which has been critiqued and reworked by several scholars. Thus, Jinnah's presence looms large whenever one wishes to look into the workings of the modern Pakistani nation-state, which, even today, is dealing with rampant factionalism. Its present condition can only be understood by analysing its convoluted past, which is incomplete without the towering figure of Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

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[1] Hamza Alavi, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh," *New Left Review* 1, no. 74 (1972): 59-81.

Brady Corbet, dir. *The Brutalist*. New York: A24 Films LLC and Saint Laurent, 2025, 201 min.

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In *The Brutalist,* Adrien Brody plays Hungarian architect László Tóth, who departs from post-war Europe in a quest for a new life in America after surviving the Holocaust. He attracts the interest of Harrison Van Buren (Guy Pearce), a wealthy philanthropist, who hires László to construct a community centre for his neighbourhood that includes a sports complex, a gym, and a prayer hall.

Brutalism was a prominent architectural style from the 1950s to the 1980s, and it was known for its massive, minimalist concrete buildings.[1] It first developed in England and quickly gained global popularity. This style emerged from both the urgent post-World War II need for cost-effective housing and as a rejection of earlier architectural trends. The name "Brutalism" was initially introduced as "nybrutalism" by Swedish architect Hans Asplund, and gained wider currency after British critic Reyner Banham adopted it in 1955. Despite its harsh-sounding name, the term is a nod to the French phrase *Béton Brut,* meaning raw concrete. Concrete is frequently used by brutalists to celebrate its honest shape and rough textures so that the structural elements should be presented truthfully. Not a single decoration or adornment. Many people hated brutalist buildings because they appeared as the bare skeleton of a building. Brutalism was one of the most divisive design movements in history because it was so distinct from earlier styles. These buildings were mocked for decades and were viewed as dystopian, aloof, and indifferent.[2]

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[1] Royal Institute of British Architects "Brutalism," accessed March 31, 2025, https://www.architecture.com/explore-architecture/brutalism.

[2] Kristin Hohenadel, 2024. "What Is Brutalist Architecture? Definition, Characteristics, and Examples," *The Spruce*. September 20, 2024, https://www.thespruce.com/what-is-brutalism-4796578.

The film opens with a striking image that foreshadows the difficulties of the protagonist László Tóth, as he flees fascism in search of freedom in America, represented by the upside-down Statue of Liberty. Through László's experiences as an immigrant, the story contrasts his dreams with the hard reality of American society. This is especially evident in his encounters with his cousin Atilla (Alessandro Nivolla), who, driven by jealousy, believes that László isn't American enough for him.[3]

Under the patronage of Harrison Van Buren (Guy Pearce), László sacrifices his well-being for his art, illuminating the exploitative nature of capitalism. A crucial incident that represents the depths of exploitation and the loss of self-worth marks the conclusion of this relationship. Erzsébet Tóth (Felicity Jones), László's wife, is a spectral apparition that symbolises the emotional bond that keeps him going through his hardships. An important turning point in László's journey occurs when he decides to leave America after realising how important it is to safeguard one's inner self. The second half of the movie parallels the creative culture of brutalism by concentrating on the raw realities of the world. The finished structure represents László's goals and traumas, expressing his inner conflicts, and desire for family. The story shows that László has to face the truth of his circumstances and his violent relationship with Harrison in order to maintain his spirit and self-love. This insight enables Erzsébet Tóth to unveil Harrison's character, leading to a dramatic dinner scene that exposes the fragility behind his powerful exterior.

The director, Brady Corbet, draws parallels between the film's structure and brutalist architecture, emphasizing its raw and uncompromising nature. In the same way that brutalism had to change to meet the demands of a post-war world, the protagonist, too, represents tenacity, adaptation, and survival. Adrien Brody's character, László Tóth, is not real but is inspired by a real architect, Marcel Breuer, who was a Hungarian architect and was trained at the German Bauhaus school, the birthplace of modern design. Like Tóth, Breuer was of Hungarian-Jewish descent who worked in the brutalist style. Unlike Brody's character, he relocated to New York in 1937, prior to the outbreak of World War II. While the term "Brutalist" in the film might suggest a focus on architectural style, the title actually reflects the protagonist's

[3] Brady Corbet, and Mona Fastvold. *The Brutalist.* screenplay, March 12, 2023, 4-30, https://a24awards.com/assets/The-Brutalist-screenplay.pdf.

personal journey, a life marked by cruelty, hardship, and emotional brutality. What truly stood out in the film wasn't the focus on architecture, or even the way the rich patrons take advantage of the artists. Instead, the movie shines when it targets two forms of pride: the belief in American superiority and the ego of the ultra-wealthy. The movie also explores how America treats immigrants, relying on their skills and hard work while often looking down on them.[4] The story slightly changes historical facts for emotional impact. Instead of landing a job at a university or architecture firm, as many Bauhaus-trained architects did after escaping Nazi Germany, Tóth ends up working in his cousin's furniture shop in Philadelphia. However, this creative choice adds power to the story.

Much like the Brutalist movement, refugees like László often face judgment and criticism before their experiences and identities are truly understood. *The Brutalist* isn't a film about architecture –it is a story about resilience and the misunderstood beauty of starting anew. It perfectly demonstrates how our opinions and tastes evolve. Once condemned, brutalist buildings are now celebrated and viewed as iconic remnants of their time. What is dismissed today is likely to face rejection again in the future until, with time, it is eventually rediscovered and truly appreciated. The wonderful thing about design is that it allows us to look back on things we used to dislike and try to find beauty in them. These designs show who people were and are today, and they may even provide us with hints about who we might become in the future.

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